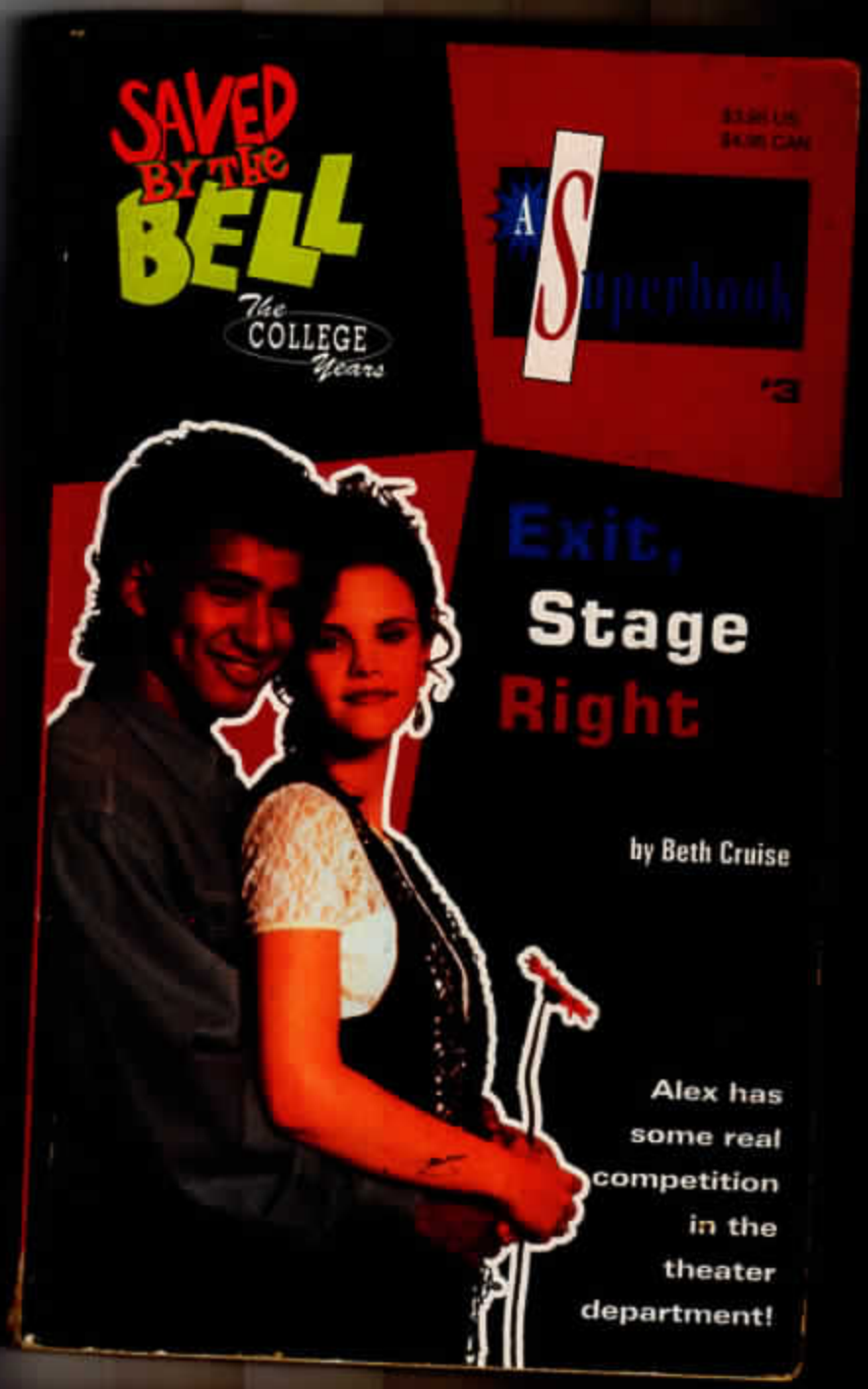
SAVED BY THE BELL
The COLLEGE Years
A Superbook
#3
Exit, Stage Right
by Beth Cruise
Alex has some real competition in the theater department!

chapter 1

Two minutes left until halftime, and the home team needed a goal. The roar of the crowd was deafening. Zack Morris narrowed his hazel eyes to focus on the football field. He watched as the quarterback threw a perfect spinning pass straight to the waiting hands of the wide receiver.

"All right!" Zack shouted. He pounded a fist on his knee as the player sprinted toward the goal. "Go, 49ers! Go, go, go, go, go—"

"STOP!"

The chorus of shouting voices was so loud it penetrated Zack's headphones. He turned away from the TV and met the irritated gazes of his suitemates, Leslie Burke, Samuel "Screech" Powers, A. C. Slater, and Alex Tabor. Even the normally sweet expression in the blue eyes of Kelly Kapowski, his high school girlfriend, had changed to complete exasperation.

Kelly's mouth started moving, but Zack could hear only the excited voice of the announcer as the

San Francisco 49ers made a touchdown. He slipped the headphones off his ears.

". . . that we're trying to study," Kelly said. "It's quiet time, remember?"

"That's why I turned on the mute button," Zack said, pointing to the TV. "See? No sound."

"Is there a mute button for *you*?" Leslie asked crisply. She flipped her blond ponytail behind her shoulder and glared at him.

"You don't have to bust a gut every time the team scores, preppie," Slater pointed out. "They're going to lose, anyway."

Zack frowned. Slater was one of his best friends, but just because he was an incredible athlete didn't mean he had the inside track on football—especially when he was talking about Zack's favorite team.

When Zack had moved from his hometown of Palisades in southern California to Cal U near San Francisco, he had stopped rooting for L.A. and vowed allegiance to the 49ers. It was hard to leave everything familiar and come to someplace new, and he thought it might help to bond with the home team.

What definitely helped was having his friends around. Screech, Slater, and Kelly had all been his high school buddies. And in the weeks since school had started, he had gotten tight with Leslie and Alex, too. Now they felt like old friends.

"The ocean of my blood moves to the tides of exhilaration and despair!" Alex Tabor suddenly announced in her throaty voice. Then she dropped it down to a whisper. "I need to live in an anarchy of absolutes. Beautiful and free. And I'm stuck in a place ruled by . . . a place ruled by . . ."

"Peace and quiet!" Leslie completed. "At least that's what I *thought* study time was supposed to be!"

"I'm sorry, Leslie," Alex said. "I just have to be *perfect* for my audition. A place ruled by . . . philistines!" She clutched her play script and sighed. "Isn't that beautiful?"

No one answered her. Everyone was bent over their books, and Zack had replaced the headphones on his ears.

"Uh, Slater?" Alex asked. "What's a philistine?"

Slater didn't look up from his page. "Phyllis Steen?" he mumbled. "I think she's that redheaded girl in my geology class."

"I didn't know Phyllis was involved in Student Government," Screech said. "That's really impressive for a freshman." Screech's wiry curls bobbed happily. He was a computer geek who was only a few bytes away from being a complete nerd.

"*Philistine*, guys," Alex corrected. "And somehow I don't think this playwright was writing about the redhead in your geology class."

Leslie sighed. "A philistine is a person completely lacking in culture or refinement." She grinned. "Sort of like your boyfriend, Alex."

Slater looked up. "Hey, I resent that. Why is it that when you have a practically perfect body people assume you're a . . ."

"Philistine," Alex supplied with a giggle.

"Can we please be quiet?" Kelly pleaded. "If I don't get this material down, I'll flunk my quiz tomorrow."

"All *right*!" Zack said.

"Thanks, Zack," Kelly said gratefully. But when she looked his way, she saw that Zack was talking to the TV. Kelly shook back her long, dark hair and raised her textbook again.

"Exhilaration and despair," Alex muttered.

Slater tuned out Alex's murmurings and concentrated on his homework again. For the first time since he'd arrived at Cal U, he had really connected with one of his classes. He actually looked forward to doing his assignments!

At first, his English comp class had been a nightmare. He had been on a long, slow slide into C– territory. He hadn't realized that composition involved *grammar*. Slater remembered some of the stuff vaguely from high school—nominatives, predicates, agreement. But it looked like a foreign language.

And when it came to writing a composition, he was completely in the dark.

Then Professor Wicker had given the class a new assignment. She had given each student a drop-off box at the Student Union. They were supposed to start a journal, then drop off the pages at the box twice a week and pick up what was there. Another student in the class would have dropped off his or her pages. The exchange would be completely anonymous. Nobody would know who they were trading entries with.

At first, Slater had been freaked at the thought of confiding his deepest thoughts to paper. He still wasn't crazy about it. But reading the deepest thoughts of his anonymous student had changed his mind. He was starting to look forward to getting her reflections on life. She was shy and sensitive, like a wounded sparrow. She was having a hard time adjusting to college life.

Slater turned back to her most recent journal entry.

As a child, the universe breathes around you. It's part of you. Even the trees seem to belong to you. The sky. But now the friendly sky that seemed to hug the earth is a cold blue wall. How can it be that I'm so surrounded by people and feel so alone?

Slater looked up at his roommates. He knew

exactly how the writer felt. He was close to his friends, and he was happy to be at Cal U. But sometimes, he wasn't sure how he was fitting in. At Bayside High, he knew right where he belonged. He was captain of the football and wrestling teams and had a group of true-blue friends. And even though some of those friends were at Cal U, things were different.

It was like the girl said. He'd known every tree on his block back home. But here, everything was new. Sometimes that was good. But sometimes it just made him feel alone.

Slater uncapped his pen. He turned to a clean sheet of paper in his notebook and wrote:

It's great to be at Cal U—there are so many things to experience. But everything is so big here that I sometimes feel like I'm getting lost in the shuffle. In high school, everyone knew me. I had a lot of friends. I think I'm making some new friends here, but I wonder if—

"Touchdown! Yes!" Zack suddenly yelped. He sprang up joyfully, but the headphone cord was too short and the plug shot out of the TV. The sound of a cheering crowd roared through the quiet suite as Zack stumbled backward, knocking over his glass of soda. It spilled over Leslie's clean, white page.

"Zack!" Leslie cried. "That's my French homework!"

"Turn that down!" Kelly said, her hands over her ears.

"I've completely lost my concentration!" Alex complained.

"I've lost my place," Screech added.

Quickly, Zack turned off the TV. "Sorry, guys," he said.

Leslie held up a dripping page. "Sorry? *Sorry?* Is that all you can say?"

"*Pardon?*" Zack tried hopefully in a French accent.

"It took me an hour to write this," Leslie said. "Now I have to start all over."

"Does that mean we have to be quiet for *another* hour?" Zack groaned.

"You see? It's all Zack's fault," Alex complained. "If he wasn't so allergic to books, we could all get some quiet time."

"As long as you weren't memorizing a part," Slater murmured.

"Oh, Slater, that's sweet," Alex said. "I never want to be apart, either."

Leslie slammed her book shut and stood up. "I'm out of here. I can't study in this atmosphere."

"*Nobody* can study in this atmosphere," Slater said. "I'm heading out, too."

"I'll never get my concentration back," Alex declared. "I'll just have to run lines in the shower."

"Hold on, you guys," Kelly said. "We knew this quiet time idea was going to have some rough spots. Maybe what we need is a break. How about some popcorn?"

"Sounds great to me," Zack said. He smiled at Kelly. No wonder he was still crazy about his high school girlfriend. She had a gift for smoothing over any tense situation.

"I'll help you," Leslie said, her frown changing to a smile. "I could use a break."

"Could we leave the butter off that popcorn?" Alex requested. "I need to look really skinny for my audition. I'm supposed to be this depressed housewife in Kansas in the 1800s. And Professor Terrine isn't exactly my biggest fan."

"What's the problem, Alex?" Kelly asked as she placed the popcorn bag in the microwave. "I thought you were doing great in the theater department."

"Sure, when it comes to comedy," Alex said. "Professor Terrine thinks I'm a terrific 'light comedienne.'" She sniffed the last few words in an imitation of a stuffy, arrogant voice. "But I really want to strut my dramatic stuff. This play has a great female lead. She's so depressed, she's practically suicidal! It's fantastic!"

"Sounds pretty intense," Leslie said, filling up the glasses with ice.

"It is. It's a chance to really prove myself," Alex said. "This could be my big breakthrough!"

"Well, good luck tomorrow," Slater said sincerely.

"Slater!" Alex wailed. "I've told you practically a million times not to say those words!"

"Good luck?" Slater asked, confused.

Alex clapped her hands over her ears. "It's bad luck. You're supposed to tell me to break a leg. You've probably jinxed my audition."

"Okay, okay," Slater said hastily. "Break a leg, Alex. Break *two* legs."

Screech looked up from his textbook. "That's mean, Slater. I know Alex is kind of clumsy, but you shouldn't discourage her if she's going on a ski trip. It's bad luck." He turned to Alex. "Good luck, Alex!" he cried.

Alex clapped her hands over her ears and screamed.

"She's not going on a ski trip, Screech," Kelly explained. "She has an audition."

"That is, if Professor Terrine will keep an open mind," Alex said worriedly. "He's completely against me for absolutely no reason! I mean, he thinks I'm some kind of kook! Can you believe it?"

The gang exchanged glances. They all really liked Alex, and they believed in her talent. But if

they had to draw up a list of kooks, they knew that Alex Tabor would be right at the top.

"Maybe you should take it up with the Student-Teacher Grievance Committee, Alex," Screech told her solemnly. "I'll bet you could get Phyllis Steen to help!"

chapter 2

"But I'm not asking you to forgive me, Jonathan," Alex said defiantly. "Forgiveness is for people who only look back. Forgiveness is for cowards."

Alex heard her voice soar over the empty seats. Right then, she *was* Amelia Sandborn. She was just one step away from insanity. Or maybe one step closer to finding herself. The audience shouldn't be sure. Not yet.

She finished by folding her hands over her skirt and looking straight out at the empty theater, eyes blazing. She visualized a white-hot flame, burning. She hoped it would charge Professor Terrine right out of his seat as he shouted, "That's our Amelia!"

But instead she heard a quiet "Thank you, Miss Tabor."

That was all. But was she kidding herself, or did she hear respect in his voice? Alex walked offstage. The other would-be performers were standing in

the wings, and Alex was greeted by her friend, Torie Heller.

"You were fantastic," Torie said, squeezing her arm. "I'd hate you if I didn't like you so much. You're going to get the lead for sure."

"That was a decent job, Tabor," Noreen Vance said. "You nailed the character, all right."

Alex couldn't believe it. Even Noreen Vance thought she was good! Noreen was a senior and the reigning star of the theater department. She would have been trying out for the same part, except that this was a freshman production. Noreen usually ignored Alex, so her praise really meant something.

"It's a lock," Mark MacLeod said. "Alex, I *knew* you were crazy enough to play Amelia Sandborn."

Alex grinned. "Thanks. I think. I hope you guys are right. How does Professor Terrine look?"

The students peered out from a crack in the curtain. Professor Terrine was studying his notes on a clipboard.

"He looks like he always does," Torie said. "Like he just ate a dozen lemons for lunch."

"Terrine may be a pain," Noreen observed, "but he's fair. I think you're in, Tabor."

Just then Professor Terrine's teaching assistant hurried down the aisle. He bent over and whispered in Professor Terrine's ear. Terrine jerked to his feet

like a marionette. He ran up the aisle toward the back of the theater.

"What's that all about?" Alex wondered aloud. "Is the theater on fire?"

"It's just like Terrine not to tell us," Mark groused. "He'd love it if the freshman class burned to a crisp."

Noreen's eyes were trained on the empty theater. "Oh, my gosh," she breathed. "Is that who I think it is?"

"Who?" Alex asked. She craned her neck to see down the darkened aisle. Professor Terrine was leading a student toward the stage. His head was bent over her as she spoke to him in a low voice. The student was wearing loose-fitting jeans and a baseball cap, which made it impossible to tell what she looked like.

"Who is it, Noreen?" Torie asked.

"I don't believe it," Noreen said.

Professor Terrine ushered the student onto the stage. He pointed her to a stool. The student sat down and took off her baseball cap. Long, silky blond hair spilled down her back. The lights caught a flash of green eyes.

"It's Merlin Scott Jones!" Alex, Mark, and Torie breathed.

"In the million-dollar flesh," Noreen said flatly.

"What's she doing at Cal U?" Torie wondered.

"What's she doing here at auditions?" Noreen said.

Alex gulped as a sinking feeling came over her. The delicate, ethereal Merlin Scott Jones wasn't just an actor. She was a superstar. She was the youngest in the famous acting dynasty of Scott Joneses. Her great-great-great-grandfather, Elijah Scott Jones, was known as the best American Shakespearean actor ever.

Merlin herself entered the acting profession at the age of six. When she was nine, she played an orphan in her mother's huge hit film, *The Willows of Windemere*. They made Oscar history when both Merlin *and* her mother, Cordelia Scott Jones, won statuettes. After her smash success in *Young Rage*, Merlin was on the cover of *Fame* magazine as Waif of the Year. And this year, her campaign as a model for Bijou Jeans had made her a poster girl in practically every guy's dorm room at Cal U.

Alex was up against a gorgeous Oscar winner for her very first starring role!

Professor Terrine bustled around Merlin. He took her denim jacket. He bent over her, listening to what she was saying. Then he called for Dave Brodie, who was working the lights, to kill the spotlight. Dave tried several different lighting configurations until Merlin was satisfied. Her blond hair now

shone like an angel's and her perfect porcelain skin was luminous.

"How do you like that," Torie murmured. "We practically have to play in the dark, and Merlin gets custom-designed lighting."

"Are you ready, Merlin?" Professor Terrine asked.

Merlin gave a shy nod. "I guess so."

"Okay. Just take your time," Professor Terrine said as he backed away. He scurried to the stairs and stumbled to his seat in the fifth row.

"This is making me sick," Torie said.

"Don't worry, Alex," Mark said. "Just because Professor Terrine is starstruck, it doesn't mean he'll hand her the part on a silver platter."

"Right," Alex murmured. "It will be a *platinum* platter."

"No way," Torie said loyally. "You're still perfect for the part. Merlin is too beautiful."

"Gee, thanks," Alex said.

"I didn't mean it that way," Torie added. "I mean, it's not a glamorous role. Merlin might just be distracting. Anyway, just because Merlin won an Oscar doesn't mean she can act on stage."

"Shhh," Noreen warned. "She's starting to read."

Alex leaned forward as Merlin began to recite her lines. She'd chosen the same speech Alex had—

the climactic scene at the end of the third act. Merlin seemed a little nervous. Maybe Alex would luck out and Merlin would be terrible.

"Maybe you're right, you guys," she whispered as she turned to her friends. "She might . . ."

But the words died on Alex's lips. Torie, Mark, and Noreen hadn't even heard her. They were all watching Merlin as though they were mesmerized. Mark's jaw had dropped, and Noreen's expression was a mixture of envy and fascination.

Merlin stumbled over a line. She wasn't as well prepared as Alex had been. But Alex knew it didn't matter. Merlin had star quality. No one could take their eyes off her. For the first time that day, Professor Terrine was leaning forward in his seat.

It didn't matter how Merlin's audition went, Alex knew. She had lost the part the minute Merlin had stepped on the stage.

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Zack opened the door of the suite and tossed his knapsack on the table. Then he threw himself on the couch and let out a groan.

Kelly poked her head out of the bedroom. "What's up? Did Screech's pet lizard die or something?"

Zack straightened up. "No need for panic. Just another grueling marketing quiz."

Kelly grinned. "Guess you shouldn't have watched those football games yesterday."

"It's un-American not to watch football on Sunday afternoon," Zack protested. "You wouldn't want me to be unpatriotic, would you?"

"Never," Kelly said solemnly.

"So where is everybody?" Zack asked.

"Leslie is at the French language lab, Screech and Slater are in class, and Alex is at her audition," Kelly said, ticking off the gang on her fingers.

Zack forgot his probable C+ in marketing and felt instantly cheerful. He and Kelly were never alone. There was always someone else in the suite, getting in his way just when he wanted to up the romantic ante.

Zack had arrived at Cal U ready to experiment. Everywhere he looked, there were girls, girls, girls. He could hardly wait to get his dating feet wet. And then when he'd met Leslie Burke, he knew just how he wanted to wade in.

Leslie was tall and blond and beautiful. She was smart and funny and nice. The fact that her father just happened to be a millionaire and had endowed tons of money to Cal U wasn't really a factor. He would have wanted to date her, anyway. But he probably wouldn't have been quite so persistent when Leslie kept shooting him down.

The funny thing was, when he and Leslie had

finally started dating, they'd both felt that something was missing. So they'd decided to just be friends. Zack had slowed down and taken a look around. Sure, there were still girls, girls, girls. But his brief relationship with Leslie made him realize that right across the room from him was the best girl of all.

Zack had known Kelly all his life and had been in love with her for about half of it. But college was a whole different story. They had discussed it back in Palisades and decided that the mature thing to do was to just be friends at school. That meant no dates. No kisses. No flirting.

And it was driving him crazy. Just looking at Kelly's fresh, beautiful face brightened his day. Thinking of her kind, gentle smile lifted his heart.

How could he be smack in the middle of a campus teeming with gorgeous girls and only be able to think about his high school girlfriend? It wasn't fair!

"Zack?" Kelly asked. "Are you okay? You look kind of sick to your stomach."

"I'm fine," Zack said quickly. "What about you? What are you doing home?"

"I have two free periods in a row," Kelly explained. "I was hitting the books all weekend for my quiz in history. After that class, I just couldn't face any more studying."

"So how did you do?" Zack asked. He moved over on the couch to make room for Kelly, but she didn't sit down. She stayed in the doorway, fiddling with her ponytail.

"I think I might have aced it," Kelly said, a delighted grin spreading over her pretty face.

"Awesome!" Zack said. "We should celebrate."

"Yeah, maybe I'll pick up some ice cream for dessert tonight," Kelly said thoughtfully.

"No, I mean *now*," Zack said. "Why wait until tonight?"

"Oh," Kelly said. She shifted from one foot to the other.

"We could go out for lunch someplace off campus," Zack said. "My treat."

"Thanks, Zack. But I already had lunch," Kelly said.

"How about a game of pool?" Zack suggested. "Or going for a swim *in* a pool?"

Kelly shook her head. "I'm not in the mood. But thanks."

"I know!" Zack exclaimed. "We could catch the bus to San Francisco and wander around. Remember how much you loved those cafés in North Beach?" Zack looked at Kelly hopefully. They'd been to San Francisco together when they were seniors in high school. They had been broken up at the time, and

the city had worked its magic. They had confessed that they still loved each other right by San Francisco Bay.

"Zack," Kelly said softly, "I don't think it would be a good idea."

"Why not?" Zack asked.

"Well, it would be sort of like . . . a date," Kelly replied.

"Exactly!" Zack said.

Kelly sighed. "Zack, I told you how I feel. College is too overwhelming an experience right now for me to even consider getting seriously involved with you again. And anyway, I'm here to test my wings. I don't think it's a good idea to fall into old familiar patterns."

Zack sighed. Kelly *had* told him all this before. He wasn't crazy about being called an old familiar pattern, either. He'd tried to prove her wrong by showing her how much college was broadening him. But his arms had ached from carrying around heavy books on philosophy. And he kept falling asleep during the foreign movies he went to. Anyway, none of it had worked. Kelly was sweet and breezy and totally friendly. But not quite friendly enough.

Kelly reached behind her for her purse. "I really have to run. I have to . . . study."

"But I thought you said—"

"I'll catch you later," Kelly said, hurrying toward the door. "Bye, Zack!"

Zack crashed backward against the cushions. Obviously, Kelly just couldn't stand being alone with him. She was always rushing out to test those wings of hers. If only he could institute a landing pattern!

He'd been overjoyed when Kelly had become one of his suitemates. But now he knew it was the worst thing that could have happened. Being around her so much and not being with her was a whole new form of torture. He had to either forget her or win her back—or he'd completely lose his mind!

chapter 3

An hour of studying before breakfast. Rush off to class. Wrestling practice. Lunch is a turkey sandwich from a vending machine that I eat on the way to life sciences class. Sneak in forty minutes to study at the library and then off to the Falcon's Nest. Now here I am on a break, writing in my journal.

Here's what I've been thinking: Does all this running around at school mean I'll never really experience anything? So far, the days and weeks go by in a blur. Will my four years be over before I feel like they've even started?

Slater closed the cover on his notebook. He knew his secret correspondent would understand exactly how he felt. They were beginning to comment back and forth on each other's entries.

When he'd tried to express the same thoughts to Alex, she hadn't really understood. She lived her life at warp speed and considered it the only way to fly. Slater loved her flash and style. But sometimes

he just wanted her to calm down and listen to him. Really listen.

When Slater told her about his fear that his college career would fly by in a blur, Alex had said she agreed *absolutely*. Just yesterday, she barely had a chance to sit down, and it wasn't until her head hit the pillow that she realized she'd forgotten to call her friend Torie and she'd left her hat in American Lit 101!

Slater ran his hand across his notebook. Who could his secret correspondent be? Could it be Alicia Quintana, the girl with the long strawberry-blond braid who commented so intelligently on the material in class? Or Jenny Briggs, who always wore black T-shirts and looked so melancholy? She would definitely be the smart, quiet type, Slater decided. Someone whose beauty didn't hit you over the head, but sneaked up on you quietly . . .

"A. C.! You taking a break or a vacation?"

Slater jumped up guiltily. His boss, Solly Menkin, had caught him staring into space. He couldn't afford to lose this job. It was helping to put him through school.

"Sorry, Solly," he called. He stowed his notebook in his backpack and hurried to clear a table.

It was good that Solly interrupted him, he thought. He was romanticizing this girl way out of proportion. It didn't matter what she looked like,

anyway. He'd still like to meet her. It would be nice to have someone to talk to—someone who really understood him.

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Zack got home early, hoping to catch Kelly alone again. But Screech was in the living room watching TV, and Kelly was already in the shower. Zack flopped on the couch with a sigh.

Within minutes, the rest of the gang came charging through the door. Slater dumped his books in his room and went straight to the refrigerator. Leslie kicked off her sneakers and sipped a glass of iced tea. Kelly came out of the girls' room rubbing her damp hair with a towel. With no makeup and wet hair, she looked more gorgeous than ever. Zack looked away.

Suddenly, Alex cannonballed through the door. She threw her backpack on the floor and raised her arms dramatically.

"Attention. Now hear this," she proclaimed. "Alex Tabor has just experienced the very worst day of her life!"

"You didn't get the part?" Leslie asked sympathetically.

"Professor Terrine hasn't posted the cast list yet," Alex said. She swept off her hat with the velvet

flowers and tossed it on a chair. "But I don't need to see it. I didn't get the part."

"How do you know for sure?" Slater asked. He came up behind Alex and began to rub her tense shoulders.

Alex barely noticed him. She gave a theatrical pause and looked at each of her suitemates in turn. "Because Merlin Scott Jones *did*!" She untied her cardigan from around her neck and threw it passionately on the floor.

Alex waited out the cries of disbelief from the gang. Then she quickly filled them in on what had happened at the audition that day.

"I see why you're worried, Alex," Kelly said when she'd finished. "Merlin Scott Jones must be tough competition for you. But it still doesn't mean she'll get the part."

"Of course not," Slater said.

"Sure," Leslie said. "Having Merlin as the star might throw the weight off the production."

"That's true," Alex said thoughtfully.

"And maybe Professor Terrine wouldn't want to discourage the other actors right at the start," Kelly suggested. "After all, you guys have been studying and working together for weeks now. A stranger can't just waltz in and get a leading role, just like that. Even if she *is* an Oscar winner. Right?"

"Maybe," Alex said with a slow nod.

"Alex, you've paid your dues already," Zack pointed out. "Didn't you paint more scenery than anybody else?"

"I've got the blisters to prove it," Alex said, holding up her pinky.

"Merlin is a spoiled brat," Slater said flatly. "Doesn't anyone around here read *Fame* magazine? Her career is on the skids after she bombed last year in *Let's Play House*. She was kicked off the set of *Wild Thing* because she kept throwing tantrums. If Terrine has half a brain, he won't *want* to put up with her."

"Right," Zack told Alex. "She sounds like a total loser. But do you have her phone number?"

"Dream on, bozo," Slater told Zack with a grin. "Girls like that date guys who look as good as they do."

"What are you saying, Slater?" Zack asked, smoothing his blond hair. "I'm not good looking enough for Merlin Scott Jones?"

"You're not good looking enough for the Wicked Witch of the West," Leslie cracked.

"Hey, I resent that," Zack said. "And anyway—"

The phone rang. Alex froze. "I can't answer that," she said. "I can't. It's probably Torie. She went to check to see if the cast list was posted. I

can't do it. I can't, I can't—" She sprang for the phone and snatched it up. "Torie?"

The gang watched as Alex's face slowly changed from guarded hopefulness to complete despair.

"Okay. . . . Okay," she said. "Yeah. Thanks. . . . Right. Bye."

Alex replaced the phone. "This," she said, "is the perfect ending to my perfectly awful day."

"Did Merlin get the part?" Slater asked.

Alex nodded. "Not only did she get the part, but Professor Terrine is turning the show into a big fund-raiser—complete with posters and publicity. We've been trying to raise money for a new theater, and Professor Terrine thinks Merlin will be a great drawing card. With her in the lead, we'll probably sell out. Not like it would have been with some unknown college freshman playing Amelia Sandborn."

"Did you get any part?" Slater asked quietly.

Alex sighed. "I'm Merlin's understudy. You can imagine how thrilled I am about *that*. And I got the main supporting role of the neighbor. It's a good part, I guess. Not that anyone will notice I'm on stage." Alex crashed gloomily into the armchair.

Slater perched on the arm. "You can *make* them notice. You can act Merlin Scott Jones right off the stage!"

"Just be careful she doesn't break a leg," Screech advised.

"I can't believe I lost out after that audition," Alex said, almost to herself. "It was the best I'd ever done. It just isn't fair!"

"It's not fair," Slater agreed, rubbing her neck. "But that's life."

"I'll never recover from this," Alex said dramatically. "This is a major, major setback."

"Maybe it's a good learning experience, sweetie," Slater said gently. "You're going to be up against actors like Merlin all the time someday. That's how good you are. You have to learn how to roll with the punches."

"How can I?" Alex said woefully. "I'm not a boxer. I'm an actor!"

The gang exchanged glances. They'd seen Alex depressed before. Her lows were just as dramatic as her highs. But she usually recovered from a bad mood in minutes. She'd never seemed *this* down before.

"I'll tell you what," Slater said. "Why don't I take you to San Francisco tonight? We can eat in Chinatown. You know that Chinatown always cheers you up."

"Nothing can cheer me up," Alex replied dolefully.

"Not even moo shu pork?" Screech asked. "Wow. This *is* bad."

"Don't you understand what I'm saying?" Alex wailed to her friends. "I'm destroyed!"

"Listen to me, Alex," Slater said firmly. "You just have to get your hands on that character part and make it yours. After all, there'll be major critics in the audience. They might come for Merlin, but they'll also see Alex Tabor."

"You know, I'm just going to have to find a way to accept this," Alex said, her face brightening a bit. "I mean, sure it isn't fair. But that's life, right?"

"Right," Slater said soothingly.

"And after all," Alex said, sitting up, "I'll be up against actors like Merlin Scott Jones later in my career. I'd better learn how to handle it. This could be a really good learning experience."

"That's a good point, Alex," Screech said. "Now, where have I heard it before?"

"I can't imagine," Slater said. His hands dropped off Alex's shoulders.

Alex sprang to her feet. "And there'll be some heavyweight critics in the audience," she went on. "They'll come to see Merlin, but they might notice me if I give a dynamic performance. What I have to do is sink my teeth into that character role!"

"Good point," Slater said dryly.

"Not to mention that I want the new theater just as much as anybody," Alex went on. "If Merlin will bring in more revenue, it's good for the whole department. You know, this could be one of the best things that has ever happened to me!"

Leslie looked at Kelly. "Excuse me. Did I nod off? Wasn't this the girl who was *destroyed* half a minute ago?"

Alex began to whirl around the living room, picking up her backpack, her hat, and her cardigan.

"So are you guys heading off to Chinatown?" Kelly asked.

"Bring me back an egg roll!" Screech called.

"I can't go to Chinatown tonight, Slater," Alex said breathlessly. "I've got to lock myself in my room and start studying my part! I can't waste a second."

Slater nodded, but he couldn't help feeling hurt. He didn't like that Alex thought of dinner with him as wasting time. Still, he didn't want to admit that to her. "No sweat," he said. "I've got work to do, anyway."

"Sure?" Alex said, poised on the doorway to her room.

"I'm sure. Go ahead," Slater said.

Alex closed the door to the girls' bedroom. Slater went to his room, slipped his journal out of his backpack, and started to write.

Sometimes it's hard to love someone who

doesn't need you. I fell for A. like a ton of bricks. She's full of life—so feisty and independent. But why do the qualities you first love in a person sometimes drive you away? If only A. would need me once in a while. Sometimes with her I feel like I'm disappearing.

Slater put down his pen. He felt better already, knowing his thoughts would be heard.

As he scanned what he'd just written, his mind speculated on who his secret correspondent was. If only he knew! Would it be so terrible to find out? He knew he should stick to the rules. But the girl sounded so lost and alone. Maybe he could befriend her without her ever knowing that she was his secret correspondent.

Slater's mood lightened right away. As soon as he could, he would stake out the Student Union for as long as it took. He'd see who asked for the contents of Box 1026.

Alex would always have his heart. But he'd find the girl who had captured his soul.

chapter 4

A few days later, Alex ran up the stairs of the theater arts building. She heard a voice calling her name behind her and turned to find Torie hurrying to catch up.

Torie blew a strand of curly blond hair out of her eyes. "Whew. Where's the fire, Alex? I've been trying to catch up to you for blocks."

"I didn't want to be late for rehearsal," Alex explained.

"Why not?" Torie asked. "You didn't want to miss one of Miss Scott Jones's tantrums? Usually rehearsals start out semirelaxed, *then* they turn into chaos. But thanks to Miss Prima Donna, we're in panic mode right from the start."

"She has been kind of difficult," Alex agreed, swinging open the door.

"*Kind of*? She'd give Attila the Hun a run for his money," Torie said darkly.

"I think she's nervous," Alex said as they walked down the hall. "She's never done stage work before.

Live theater is completely different from film. You have to memorize big chunks of dialogue and project everything clearly. I think she's having a hard time with it."

"That doesn't give her the right to blast everyone in sight," Torie declared. She peered at Alex. "Why are you defending her? I know she's getting to you, too."

"I'm trying to give her a chance, that's all," Alex said with a sigh. "I'm not crazy about her behavior. But I'm hoping that once she settles in, I can learn from her. She *is* a fantastic actor, Torie."

"And a lousy human being," Torie groused. "You know what really gets me? She never has a tantrum when Professor Terrine is around. If she has such an uncontrollable temper, how come she can control it when it might get her in trouble?"

Alex thought about that. Torie was right. So far, Merlin had snapped at her fellow actors, had lost it with the lighting designer, and had even gotten furious at Sarah Todd, who brought her a tuna sandwich with mayo instead of without. When Sarah had dared to explain that nobody made tuna fish without mayo, Merlin had barked that she'd better *find* someone or make it herself, because Merlin *never* ate mayonnaise.

Maybe it was just a coincidence that Professor Terrine wasn't around for any of those encounters.

Or maybe Merlin was more in control than she looked.

"Well, I'm still going to give her a chance," Alex said as they headed for the theater. "I'm going to be completely professional. I'll outpro the pro."

"Wow, you're incredible," Torie said with admiration. "I want to punch her in the nose, and you're trying to understand her. You really *are* a pro."

"I'm trying," Alex said. "Shhh, there she is," she added, lowering her voice.

Merlin was just stepping out of the dressing room. She was winding her long blond hair into a bun as she walked, but the silky tresses kept spilling out down her back.

"Can I give you a hand with that?" Alex asked helpfully. "I think I have some bobby pins." She dug her hand into her purse.

"I've got it covered," Merlin said. She tucked up the last strand and jabbed in a pin to anchor it.

"Here, just in case," Alex said, handing her some additional pins. "You know, Merlin, I like the way our scene is coming along. Yesterday it started to come to life, don't you think?"

Merlin fixed her green eyes on Alex. "What do you think?" she asked evenly.

"Oh, I think it did," Alex assured her. "I like what you did with the speech about the apple trees.

You gave such a sad twist to that last line. It was really effective."

Merlin just looked at her, and Alex began to feel uncomfortable. What was the girl's problem? She'd just said something *nice*. And it was true. Alex *had* been impressed. Every so often Merlin would do something in rehearsal that took Alex's breath away. That was why Alex was giving Merlin a chance. She knew there was a great actor in there who was terrified of failing.

"You know what really makes me nervous, Tabor?" Merlin asked.

Good, Merlin is finally starting to loosen up, Alex thought. She was going to share some of her anxieties with Alex. "What?" Alex encouraged.

"An understudy who sucks up to the star," Merlin said. She dropped the pins into Alex's hand and walked away.

Torie materialized behind Alex. "Still want to give her a chance?" she whispered.

Alex gritted her teeth. "I'm a pro," she said grimly. "I'm a pro." Maybe if she said it enough times, she wouldn't blow up in Merlin's face.

Alex headed for the stage. The cast members were supposed to be "off book" by tomorrow, which meant all their lines should be memorized. The rehearsal schedule was especially tight. They

were under pressure already, and Merlin wasn't helping a bit.

Suddenly, Alex heard Merlin's raised voice. "No brown. No earth tones."

"But Merlin, we discussed this with Professor Terrine and the rest of the designers," Samantha Marx said. Sam was the costume designer for the play. "We want to go with muted colors for Amelia. Then in the last scene that emerald-green gown will really have an impact. It will point up her transformation."

Alex drew closer and saw that Merlin's face was tight and angry.

"I don't remember being consulted about this," she snapped. "I don't wear earth tones. I'll disappear in this rag," she said, throwing the material back at Sam.

The material fell to the floor. Sam bent over to pick it up, and Alex could see that Sam's neck was flushed a livid red.

"Uh-oh," Torie breathed behind Alex.

"Find me a desk so I can crawl under it," Mark muttered. "Merlin's about to blow."

"You're trying to sabotage me!" Merlin said shrilly. "You want me to disappear so that your crummy friends will shine! Are you giving Alex Tabor that blue dress?"

"The blue dress is right for Alex's character,"

Sam explained quietly. "She's a single woman who's out to catch a husband."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Sally, or Sandra, or whatever your name is. Are you trying to win a Tony Award? Wake up. This is a *college* production. Just give me the blue material, all right?" Merlin was practically shouting. "I have more important things to do than stand here and argue with you!"

"Maybe you should start with taking care of your own job!" Alex suddenly snapped. "Sam's got her job to do. That's *Sam*, Merlin. Not Sarah. Not Sally. Not Stacy, not Sandy, not Susan. The least you could do is get the name right. After all, she's just trying to help you."

Merlin whirled around, her catlike eyes glinting at Alex. "I don't think this is any of your business, Tabor."

"Neither is telling Sam how to design costumes," Alex shot back. "This is *school*. We come here to learn, not make demands."

"I can't believe this," Merlin said. "I don't see how I can continue in this unprofessional atmosphere. The whole cast is against me just because I've won an Oscar!"

"You're the one who's acting unprofessional!" Alex roared. "You're the one who blames everyone else when you blow your lines or can't remember your blocking! It's not the set designer's fault that

you keep bumping into the furniture! It's because you keep forgetting your mark! And it's not the stage manager's fault if your performance lays there like a hound dog on a hot day! It's because you're not prepared!"

"Alex!" Professor Terrine thundered. "That's enough!"

Alex turned around slowly. Professor Terrine was standing in the wings, his hands on his hips.

"I will not tolerate this behavior from anyone in my cast," he said icily. "It is extremely unprofessional."

"But Professor Terrine—" Alex objected.

"Not another word," he said. "If you can't keep your temper under control, Miss Tabor, you'll be dropped from the cast. Merlin, would you come with me, please?"

Merlin threw Alex a smug look as she walked onstage with Professor Terrine. Alex tried to control her ragged breathing. She'd really lost it.

"Thanks for standing up for me, Alex," Sam said ruefully. "But I think I have to put you in the brown dress."

"It's okay, Sam," Alex said. She glanced out onstage, where Merlin was looking up at Professor Terrine as if he held the answers to every question she'd ever thought of. Merlin was dangerous, Alex

saw suddenly. She lashed out when she was insecure or scared and didn't care who she hurt.

Everyone here had become Alex's friends. She couldn't stand to see Merlin dump on them. But she had to hold her tongue if she wanted to keep her part. How was Alex going to make it through the rest of the rehearsals without blowing her stack?

¤ ¤ ¤

Slater ducked behind the school paper he was pretending to read as another student approached the counter. She had short black hair and wore hiking boots with her khaki shorts. She looked smart, but athletic. Not quite his idea of his soul mate, but close.

"Box 1427, please," she said.

So it isn't her. Slater sighed. He was getting bored. He'd woken up this morning excited about the fact that today his mystery friend would be dropping off her journal entry.

But it had been a long morning. He didn't know how private eyes handled real stakeouts. It took all his willpower not to bolt out of there and grab a cheeseburger for lunch.

What am I doing here, anyway? Slater wondered as his stomach growled in protest. He had papers to write and quizzes to study for, and he

hadn't worked out in two days. He hadn't written to his parents since last week, and he had a duffel bag full of dirty laundry. Not to mention the fact that he hadn't spent quality time with his girlfriend in almost a week.

Poor Alex was having such a hard time in rehearsal with that prima donna, Merlin Scott Jones. Slater didn't care if she *had* won an Oscar. She sounded like a complete loser. Alex needed some major TLC, and instead of being there for her he was trying to track down someone he didn't even know!

Slater threw the paper down and started to stand up when he heard a low voice say, "Excuse me? Box 1026, please."

He slammed back down in the chair and grabbed the paper. Slater peeked out around it.

A girl dressed in sweats and a baseball cap was standing at the counter. It was the girl who always sat in the very last row of class, Slater realized. She'd joined the class late, and she never raised her hand. She slipped into class right before the bell and left while everyone else was still closing their books.

Of course, Slater thought. *It had to be her.* She was shy and retiring and sensitive. She hid from the world. And only he knew her secret soul.

The girl took the envelope and turned around. A guy on roller blades was ignoring the rules and

whizzing through the lounge. As the girl jumped out of his way, her baseball cap fell off.

Golden hair spilled down the girl's back. A rose-colored blush stained pale cheeks that were as delicate as porcelain as she bent down to retrieve the cap. She pulled it back down and the brim shadowed her face. Slater watched as perfect, even teeth bit a pouting lower lip.

Slater gulped in surprise. His sensitive soul mate was that witch, Merlin Scott Jones!

chapter 5

Slater felt paralyzed as Merlin turned and quickly walked out of the Student Union. He looked down and discovered that he'd crumpled the newspaper in his hands. He balled it up and threw it away. He kept shaking his head, as though he'd just been bonked by a two-by-four.

How could his sensitive correspondent be the same person as Alex's rampaging brat?

It couldn't be, Slater realized. The two portraits of Merlin just didn't jibe. Alex had probably been exaggerating, as usual. When it came to describing reality, you never could quite trust her perceptions. She could make ordering corned beef or pastrami into a life-or-death decision, or turn an unfriendly traffic cop into Saddam Hussein.

No, he couldn't trust Alex. As much as he adored her, she was dramatic by nature. There was just one thing to do: get to know Merlin Scott Jones for himself.

¤ ¤ ¤

When Slater got to English Comp 101, he didn't take his usual seat in the third row. He waited until right before the bell, then slipped into an empty seat near Merlin in the back.

He saw Merlin sneak a look at the man's watch on her wrist several times as class was coming to an end. He knew she would gather her books and make for the door before the bell had even stopped ringing. Getting ready to do the same, he slipped his notebook in his knapsack, hoping that Professor Wicker wouldn't say anything crucial this late in the class.

Bbrrrrriiinggggg!

Slater shot out of his seat. But he needn't have worried. Merlin was tugging at a stubborn zipper on her backpack. She was bent over, the brim of her cap shadowing her face.

"Need some help?" Slater asked.

Merlin didn't look up. "It's stuck."

Slater's heart beat faster. He'd recognize that slow, drawling voice anywhere. The voice that always seemed to have a little catch in it. The voice that had driven every male in America mad during *Young Rage.*

He leaned over and tugged at the zipper. It moved easily, and he closed the backpack.

Most girls, even shy girls, would have looked up and smiled. But Merlin still hadn't met his eyes. "Thanks," she said. She stood up and slung the backpack over her shoulder, her back to Slater.

"Um, excuse me," Slater said. "I was wondering. Would you have a cup of coffee with me? I don't know anyone in this class, and believe me, I could use a friendly face. When Professor Wicker was talking about the action of gerunds today, I thought she meant some kind of scurrying rodents. I kept lifting my feet up."

Merlin still hadn't turned to look at him. But Slater heard a soft giggle escape her. Then the giggle turned into a laugh, and she turned around. There was an amused glint in her green eyes. "I think I saw one of them on a camping trip. I screamed."

"You should have seen me doing my homework last night," Slater said, grinning.

Merlin smiled back. But suddenly, her smile faltered. She looked down at her battered sneakers. Then over at the desks. Before she could examine the light switch, Slater spoke.

"You're Merlin Scott Jones."

She still didn't look at him. One corner of her mouth lifted in a wry half-smile. "Still want to have coffee with me?" she asked.

Slater considered his reply carefully. He knew Merlin was on the verge of bolting.

"Only if you tell me what a gerund *really* is," he said.

Merlin's mouth curved into a genuine smile. "I take mine with skim milk," she said.

They walked to the Falcon's Nest together, talking about Professor Wicker and the class. But neither one of them brought up the journal exchanges. Slater was relieved. He didn't want to hear what Merlin had to say about him behind his back. What if she thought her correspondent was an insensitive, macho blockhead?

When they got to the Falcon's Nest, Slater automatically ushered Merlin to his favorite table, the round one near the entrance and warmed by the sun. But Merlin hesitated.

"A. G., could we take that other table over there? Would you mind?"

"Sure," Slater said, a little puzzled. The table Merlin pointed to was toward the back, in a dark corner. She slipped onto the seat with her back to the room. That's when Slater realized that she didn't want to be recognized. Suddenly, he felt a sharp sympathy for Merlin.

She looked at him curiously as he sat down. "Is everything okay? I was too pushy, wasn't I? If you prefer the other table, I—"

"No, no," Slater said quickly. "I was just thinking. It isn't easy to be famous, is it? You constantly

have to pick dark corners to sit in so you can eat in peace."

Merlin grimaced. "Kind of like a gerund, right?" She gave him an impish look. "I have to warn you, by the way. I haven't a clue what a gerund is."

"So why did you agree to have coffee with me?" Slater asked.

"You were the first person at school to ask me out in a natural way, just as a classmate," Merlin said. "Believe me, after a while you can really tell the difference."

Slater nodded. When the waiter looked over, he held up two fingers for coffee. As the waiter was delivering the cups, Merlin leaned over and began fiddling with her backpack.

She popped up again when the waiter was gone. "I hope you don't think I'm a complete snob," she said to Slater, pouring some milk in her coffee. "But sometimes, I want to be just me, Merlin. And that's hard when the whole room is trying not to stare at you."

There was no trace of the egocentric star in Merlin's words. She spoke matter-of-factly.

"Why did you come to Cal U, Merlin?" Slater asked curiously. "I mean, it's a state school, and you probably could have gone anywhere."

Merlin shrugged. "I got into Yale and a few other schools. My mom had a fit when I chose Cal

U. She really thought I should go to an Ivy League school. She thought I'd have more privacy."

"So why didn't you?" Slater asked.

"I came here to be normal," Merlin said, taking a sip of coffee. "I wanted to really *enjoy* my college years. I live in this plastic bubble in Hollywood. I meet only rich people or people in the film industry." Merlin paused for a second, her coffee cup halfway between the saucer and her lips. "But the funny thing is that I found out I can't be normal, even here."

"What do you mean?" Slater asked.

"Nobody talks to me," Merlin said. "Just guys who are complete jerks. The nice ones are too scared to talk to me. And girls, forget it. They won't even try. They're jealous or they're pretending I'm nobody special so why *should* they go out of their way?"

"That's awful," Slater sympathized.

Merlin shrugged. "Look, Hollywood has nothing to do with the real me. I'm always playing a character. Even in my modeling, I'm playing a character. So when people look at me like I'm that person, it's totally weird."

"I guess it would be," Slater said thoughtfully.

"The thing is that I'm jealous of *them*," Merlin went on, waving a hand at the window. "All those girls out there with families and dogs and brothers and sisters. Families who take vacations together.

Fathers who stick around. Mothers who are *mothers* and don't try to be your best friend. Who don't send you to a psychiatrist if you have the blues for one day." Merlin sipped her coffee moodily. "There's only one person I feel close to at Cal U so far."

"Who?" Slater asked. "A roommate?"

Merlin sighed and shook her head. "It's somebody I haven't even met. The guy I'm trading journal entries with in class. He's so funny and sweet. And he seems to feel the same way I do about things. It's just my luck that I'll never meet him."

Slater took a gulp of coffee, burning his mouth. He wanted to tell Merlin the truth. But then she might think he'd engineered this meeting. She might never trust him. And right now he really wanted to be her friend.

Alex had it all wrong. Merlin wasn't a witch. She was just *lonely*. She was having a hard time learning how to live like a normal person. And she'd never do it if people kept treating her like a superstar.

"Maybe you just need to give it some time," Slater offered. "When people get used to you, they won't treat you as someone special."

Merlin nodded. "That's what I'm hoping for, A. C. And I think it would help if I lived in the dorms. My mother got me this fancy apartment in Sierra Square off campus, and I hate it. I'm just not

into partying. I want to really *meet* people, not shout at them over music."

"Maybe something will come up in the dorms," Slater said.

Merlin shook her head. "I've gone to the housing office. No way." She smiled at Slater. "You're really nice to talk to, do you know that?" She put her hand on his on top of the table. "Thanks for listening," she said softly.

"No problem." Slater smiled back. He'd have to talk to Alex. She didn't know the real Merlin like he did.

But just then, Alex walked through the door. She surveyed the room, a smile on her face. The smile froze when she saw Slater sitting with Merlin Scott Jones. Her mouth dropped open, and she turned on her heel and rushed out.

Slater dug into his pocket for money. "Merlin, this was really great. But I have to go."

"What is it?" Merlin asked. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, I really enjoyed talking to you," Slater said. "But my girlfriend just saw me holding hands with you."

"Go," Merlin said quickly. "I'll handle the bill. Thanks for the coffee."

Slater rushed after Alex. He'd wanted Alex to

see the real Merlin. But did she have to see him holding hands with her?

¤ ¤ ¤

Zack dropped his marketing textbook when Alex burst into the suite.

"What's the matter?" he asked, concerned. Alex's face was bright red.

"Nothing," she said. She sat down in a chair and crossed her arms.

"You sure?"

"Absolutely nothing," Alex said.

Zack went back to his book. He'd read one sentence when Alex burst into tears.

"How can you sit there reading like that?" she wailed.

Zack sighed. "What's wrong, Alex?"

"Nothing. Nothing except my boyfriend was holding hands with my worst enemy!" Alex burst into fresh sobs. "But you go ahead," she forced out. "I don't want to interrupt your studying."

"Slater was holding hands with another girl?"

"Zack! I don't want to t-t-talk about it!" Alex cried.

"Okay," Zack said. He turned back to his book. But he dropped it again when the door crashed open and Slater hurried in. Somehow he knew he wouldn't get any studying done.

"Alex!" Slater said, panting. "You got it all wrong."

Alex stood up and swiped at her tears defiantly. "Oh? And what did I get wrong? Were you or were you not sitting with Merlin Scott Jones?"

"Wow," Zack said. "You were?"

"I was," Slater admitted.

Alex sniffed. "And were you or were you not holding hands with her?"

"Double wow," Zack said.

"I was," Slater said. "Sort of."

Alex sat down regally. "I rest my case."

"Alex, listen to me," Slater said. "Merlin is in my English comp class. She's the one I've been trading entries with, only she doesn't know it."

"How do *you* know it?" Alex asked shrewdly.

"I staked out the Student Union," Slater said sheepishly.

Alex sprang up. "You staked out the Student Union so that you could meet another girl?"

"Alex, it wasn't like that!" Slater insisted. "I thought that the writer needed a friend. She was so sad and lonely."

"Merlin Scott Jones?" Alex asked skeptically.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Slater said. "You've got her pegged all wrong. If she's been acting like a brat at rehearsals, it's because she's scared to death she won't fit in. Nobody treats her like a

real person. She says that girls are either jealous or won't talk to her at all."

"Oh, come on," Alex spit out. "I'm supposed to feel sorry for her?"

"Alex, think about it," Slater begged. "Has anyone in the cast made an effort to befriend her?"

"No," Alex grumbled. "Who wants to get their head bitten off?" But she sighed. "Okay, it *could* be true. Nobody really talks to her. And yesterday when Torie thought she saw a red spot on Merlin's nose, she was taking bets that it would turn into a pimple."

"Would you do that to anybody else?" Slater asked.

"*I* didn't bet," Alex said quickly. "I thought it was a scratch, anyway."

"You can't believe how insecure and scared she is, Alex," Slater said, pressing home his point.

"I sort of suspected she was insecure," Alex said thoughtfully.

"Alex, you've got the biggest heart in the world," Slater said, stepping toward her. "Can't you give her another chance?"

"Oh, I guess so," Alex said. "As long as you don't hold hands with her!"

"I wasn't holding hands," Slater said. "She was just thanking me for listening. She said I was the first person to really talk to her at Cal U."

"Oh, Slater, you're a much better person than I am." Alex sighed and reached for his hand. "You're so sweet."

Zack started to tiptoe out of the room. Any minute now, Slater and Alex would start kissing. He could definitely do without that.

"I just listened to her, that's all," Slater said. "Merlin says she really wants to blend in here. She even wanted to move into the dorms, but it was too late. Her mom got her this luxury apartment at Sierra Square, and she hates it."

Zack froze in his tracks. Sierra Square was also known as Party Central. The coolest kids lived there, and the waiting list to get an apartment there was as long as his arm. No, it was as long as *Slater's* arm.

"Hmm," Alex pondered. "My friends Sherry and Janine live in the next dorm. Their suitemate is moving back to Wisconsin because she misses snow. Maybe Merlin could move in with them. I could talk to them, if you want."

Slater slipped his arms around Alex. "You are the sweetest girl in the world," he said.

"No, I'm not," Alex said. "Am I, really?"

Zack heard the sound of smooching as he slipped into his room. He had just had the most brilliant brainstorm since he'd arrived at Cal U. He would take over Merlin's apartment at Sierra Square!

All he had to do was talk Merlin into it. And if what Alex said was true, it would be a piece of cake.

I'd really hate to leave the suite, Zack thought, *but being around Kelly is just too hard.* If he moved out, maybe Kelly would realize how much she missed him and would want him back.

And if not, Zack continued, the distraction of those gorgeous girls living all around him at Sierra Square couldn't hurt—not at all.

chapter 6

Zack walked up the steps of Sierra Square. The apartment complex looked like it had popped right off his TV screen. The blue pool sparkled in the courtyard, and the terraces were alive with plants and flowers. He stood for a minute, savoring the quiet. A bird chirped to him from a palm tree.

All at once the sound of rock music filled the air and two girls in bathing suits ran shrieking down the stairs. They dived into the pool and came up laughing as a large, muscular guy leaped off the diving board and cannonballed into the pool. Doors opened overhead.

"Whoa, way to go, Dino!" a guy shouted from the second floor. "Party hearty!"

The two pretty girls waved. "Come on down, Tube!" they called.

"I'm there!" The guy pantomimed climbing over his terrace while the girls screeched.

"Not again!" one of them shouted.

"Tube, you just got your cast off!" the other one said, giggling.

"Take the stairs, bro," Dino advised. "Save the jumps for Daredevil Night."

Zack chuckled as he headed up the stairs. This was the place for him, all right! Obviously, things were never boring at Sierra Square. If he needed diversion from Kelly, here it was.

He knocked on the door of apartment 3C. After a moment, a barefoot Merlin answered the door. She was wearing cutoffs and a man's shirt tied at the waist. For a minute, Zack couldn't breathe. She was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen.

Merlin's foot tapped impatiently. "Yes?"

"Uh, hi," Zack said. "I'm a friend of A. C. Slater's. Can I talk to you a minute?"

Merlin eyed him suspiciously, but she gave a short nod and let him in.

"Wow," Zack said as his feet sank into the plush carpet. The apartment was gorgeous. There was a skylight overhead. At the end of the living room was a gleaming open kitchen, and beyond that, he could see the terrace. He guessed it overlooked the pool. "Nice place," he said.

"Thanks," Merlin said. "Did A. C. send you over here?"

"Sort of," Zack said. "Can I sit down?"

Merlin nodded. Zack sank into an overstuffed

couch covered in some kind of bleached linen. "He was sorry he ran out on you that way," he said.

Merlin shrugged. "Girlfriends tend to go ballistic when I'm in the picture. It's an occupational hazard. Is everything okay?"

"Oh, sure. Alex is fine now."

Merlin's tiny nose twitched. "Alex?"

"Slater's girlfriend. Alex Tabor."

"Alex Tabor?" Merlin blurted, surprised. "*She's* A. C.'s girlfriend? She's my understudy."

"And your co-star," Zack pointed out.

"Right, she has a supporting role," Merlin said. She sat on a big ottoman and tucked one tanned leg underneath her. "A. C. and Alex. Now that's a surprise."

"They're really tight," Zack said. "Don't worry, you didn't break them up or anything."

"Good," Merlin said. "I would never dream of coming between them, honestly."

"I know," Zack said. "I just wanted to come over and assure you that they're fine."

"I'm so glad," Merlin said, flashing him a smile.

"And I wanted to tell you about Alex's great idea," Zack said, leaning forward. "Slater was telling us how you really wanted to live in the dorms."

"I did," Merlin said, trailing her fingers through her long hair and sighing. "But it's too late. I have to live here."

"Maybe not," Zack said.

Merlin gave a start. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"That's Alex's great idea," Zack told her excitedly. "She has these friends, Sherry and Janine, who are looking for a suitemate. She said she could talk to them for you."

"How nice," Merlin said stiffly.

"They're great girls," Zack assured her. "Alex said they're totally cool. You could meet them first, of course."

"Well," Merlin said. "That's really incredibly nice of Alex. But I couldn't jump ahead of the other kids on the list at the housing office. That wouldn't be fair."

"It would be perfectly fine," Zack reassured her. "If your suitemate drops out, you're allowed to fill the place yourself. So you wouldn't be breaking any rules."

"Oh," Merlin said. "That's good. But I couldn't possibly force myself on Sherry and Julia. They don't even know me."

"Janine." Zack corrected her.

"Janine," Merlin said. "I'm sure they have other friends they'd want to live with."

Zack rushed to set her at ease. "Nobody," Zack said. "Not a single person. And they'd much rather have a recommendation from someone they trust,

like Alex, than a complete stranger assigned to them."

Merlin ran a hand through her hair. "This is really nice of you, Zane."

"Zack."

"Sorry, Zack," she said. "And it's totally tempting. But I'm really locked in here, you see. I couldn't break my lease. It's, like, ironclad."

"That's the best part," Zack said convincingly. "You don't have to break your lease, because I can take it over."

"Oh," Merlin said. "You want to move in here?" she asked.

"I wouldn't mind," Zack said, looking around the place.

"Well, all right then," Merlin agreed. "When do you want to move in?"

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Zack dropped his bombshell in the suite that night after dinner. He watched Kelly's face carefully. He had to admit he was hoping for at least one little tear.

He was more than rewarded. He got a whole river of them.

Screech was really upset.

He threw himself at Zack. "How can you leave me this way?" he sobbed.

Zack patted his back. "I'm not leaving you, Screech. I'm just moving to a new place. I'll still see you all the time."

Screech sat back in his chair and wiped his cheeks. "You promise?"

"I promise," Zack said. "And you can come visit me anytime. I have a Jacuzzi and a dishwasher, and there's a satellite dish on the roof."

"A satellite dish?" Screech asked, perking up. "When are you leaving?"

"Zack, are you sure about this?" Leslie asked doubtfully. "You don't know anyone over there. You might get lonesome."

"Are you kidding?" Zack replied. "There's a party there every night. This guy Tube told me. I met him on the way out. I *already* made friends."

"It's awfully expensive," Alex said.

"I'm going to get a job," Zack said. "No sweat."

"Who's going to take your place?" Slater wondered. "Don't go getting some dweeb to move in here, preppie." He slung an arm around Screech. "We already *have* a pet dweeb."

"I already called up this guy from my marketing class," Zack said. "He's this totally cool guy named Porter. He's pretty quiet, but he's real friendly. We met when he saw me carrying a copy of the novel *The Stranger*."

"By Albert Camus, the French existentialist," Leslie said, nodding. "It's excellent."

"Right," Zack said, even though he hadn't read it. He'd just been carrying it around to impress Kelly. "Porter said it was his favorite book. Anyway, Porter has been living in a single room. He jumped at the chance to move into a suite. That is, if it's okay with you guys."

"Well, I guess so," Leslie said. "But we'll really miss you, Zack."

"We will," Screech agreed. "Now, how many channels do you get with that satellite dish?"

"I hate to admit it," Slater said, "but I might miss your face, buddy."

"I'll miss your pizza raids in the middle of the night," Alex said. "Zack, are you really, truly, totally sure about this?"

Zack nodded, but he was really waiting for Kelly to say something. She was just sitting there, letting everyone else talk. She didn't look upset at all . . . unless she was very good at hiding it.

"Kelly, you haven't said anything," Zack said pointedly.

"Zack, of course we'll miss you," Kelly said warmly. "But whatever makes you happy is what's important." She smiled at him. "Good luck."

"Thanks, Kelly," Zack said. Kelly had spoken as

though he was going out for Chinese food, not moving away. So much for upsetting her.

Maybe it will just take some time before it sinks in, he told himself. *Then she'll start to miss me.*

But until then, he had to move on to phase two. He had the apartment. Now he had to figure out a way to pay the rent.

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Alex shut off the bathroom light, slipped out of her robe, and got into bed. She pulled the covers up to her chin. Then she let out a heartrending sigh.

"Alex?" Leslie asked. She looked up from her book. "Are you okay?"

Kelly looked over from where she was brushing her hair. "What's wrong?"

"I'm a terrible, horrible, awful, terrible person, that's what's wrong," Alex said, her voice throbbing with emotion.

Leslie and Kelly exchanged an amused glance. They were used to Alex's dramatics. But they knew that even though she was going overboard, she truly was upset about something.

The girls went over and sat on the edge of Alex's bed. "Why do you think you're an awful person?" Leslie asked gently.

Alex looked at them with swimming eyes. "Did I mention terrible?" she sniffed.

Kelly smiled. "Twice."

"*I'm* the one who came up with the idea to have Merlin move on campus," Alex said. "I'm the one who called Sherry and Janine. And I'm the one who arranged for them all to meet this afternoon."

"Right," Kelly said. "But that was *nice* of you, Alex."

"I don't want her to move in!" Alex blurted out. "She'll be living just steps away from us. And if she wanted to pick someone to befriend at Cal U, why did she have to pick my boyfriend?" Alex blew her nose like a trumpet blast. "I wish she'd stay in Sierra Square. I wish she'd never met Slater." She threw herself back on the pillows. "I wish I weren't such a terrible, mean person!" She drew the covers over her head.

Kelly pulled the covers down. "You're *not* a mean person."

"You're a *smart* person," Leslie added.

"What girl in her right mind would *want* her boyfriend to be friends with Merlin Scott Jones?" Kelly demanded.

Alex raised herself up on her elbows. "You think?"

"We know," Leslie said. "Alex, if a girl who looked like Merlin befriended a guy I was dating, I'd be buying her a one-way ticket to Sri Lanka, not arranging for her to live next door."

"Oh," Alex said. "You think I shouldn't have done it?"

"It's not that," Leslie said quickly. "You kind of *had* to. The point is that it was a nice thing to do."

"But that doesn't mean you shouldn't be careful," Kelly said.

Alex hugged her knees. "So what should I do? I don't want to lose Slater."

Kelly and Leslie thought a minute. Then Leslie snapped her fingers.

"I've got it. A preemptive strike."

"Brilliant!" Kelly agreed.

"A what?" Alex asked. "You know I'm not up on those military things. I spent the entire time during the Persian Gulf War at rehearsals for a high school play."

"You have to defend your territory by advancing first," Leslie explained. "We just have to figure out *how*. What really melts Slater's heart?"

"That's easy," Kelly said, laughing. "Nothing gets to Slater's heart like his stomach."

"A romantic dinner," Leslie said. "Perfect. You'll cook him his favorite meal. Candles. A tablecloth. Dessert. And the rest of us will make ourselves scarce for the evening. You'll have the suite all to yourself."

"Lasagna," Alex said. "That's Slater's favorite.

This is a fabulous idea! Now, how do you make lasagna?"

"There's a great recipe in that cookbook my mother sent me," Leslie said. "It's in the kitchen."

"I'll go right now and look it up," Alex said, slipping out of bed and reaching for her robe. "Thanks, guys! You're the best."

Kelly smiled as the door closed behind Alex. "That's one romantic problem taken care of." Grinning, she started to get up.

Leslie put a hand on her wrist. "Not so fast, girlfriend. What about you?"

"Me?" Kelly asked guiltily. "What *about* me?"

Leslie cocked her head. "'Good luck, Zack,'" she mimicked in a too-cheerful voice. "'All we care about is your happiness, Zack. Can I pack your clothes for you, Zack?'"

"I didn't say that!" Kelly protested.

"You might as well have," Leslie said. "And if guys had eyes to see, which they don't, Zack would have been able to tell that your heart was breaking."

"You could tell?" Kelly asked in a small voice.

Leslie nodded. "Kelly, why don't you let Zack know that you don't want him to go?" she asked gently.

"Because he *wants* to go," Kelly said. "And anyway, how can I ask him to stay when I don't know

how I want our relationship to grow? Or if it should grow at all? I know him so well, Leslie," Kelly said with a sigh. "I know that he wants me back. But I can't help feeling torn. How can I come to college, with all sorts of new experiences out there and new boys to meet, and hook up with my high school boyfriend? Wouldn't that be totally stupid?"

Leslie smiled and shook her head. A month ago she had been really into Zack herself, but now she knew that Zack wasn't the guy for her. She thought that Zack and Kelly would make a terrific couple, but that was their decision. "I don't know the answer to that, Kelly," she said.

"That's the problem," Kelly said. "I don't, either."

"But college *has* taught me one thing," Leslie continued.

"I'm glad somebody's learning *something* around here," Kelly muttered. "What is it?"

"It's easy," Leslie said. "You can never find an answer by ignoring the question."

chapter 7

When Kelly and Leslie woke up the next morning, they found Alex asleep under the covers, papers strewn all over her bed. A cookbook lay open on the side of the mattress, and Alex was curled around it.

"When Alex gets an idea, she sure runs with it," Kelly whispered.

Leslie nodded, her speckled brown eyes twinkling. She tried to tiptoe past Alex's bed to the bathroom, but Alex woke up.

"Definitely lasagna," she said. "With spinach noodles. And there's this recipe for this bread called *bruscetta*. You rub toasted bread with garlic and drizzle a little olive oil on it, then add some basil and chopped tomatoes." Alex sat up, yawning.

Kelly laughed. "Didn't you ever hear of 'good morning,' Alex?"

Alex swung her feet out of bed. "Life's a race, girls. And I like to get a running start. I planned

everything last night. I even *dreamed* about it. I'm going to make the whole dinner a surprise."

Kelly and Leslie exchanged wary glances. "A surprise?" Kelly asked. "Are you sure?"

Alex ran her fingers through her auburn curls. "Sure I'm sure. I love surprises!"

"But Slater *doesn't,*" Kelly pointed out. "I've known him for *years,* Alex. We tried to give him a surprise party in high school and he found out and made us cancel it."

"That's because he found out," Alex said. "Surprises are romantic. Will you guys ask Screech and Zack to disappear tonight?"

"Zack won't be here," Kelly said. Her voice sounded a little lost. "He's moving out this morning. But I'll ask Screech," she added quickly.

"And if Porter moves in, I'll ask him," Leslie said. "You'll have a clear field, Alex."

Just then they heard a soft knock. "Are you guys awake?" Slater called softly through the door.

Alex ran over to the door. She opened it and peeked around it. "We're awake. We're just sitting around, talking about nothing. You know, just shooting the breeze. No biggie."

"I forgot to tell you I have an early wrestling practice this morning," Slater told her. "So we can't have breakfast together. Want to meet me at the Falcon's Nest on my break? We can have lunch instead."

"Sounds perfect," Alex agreed. "And Slater? Why don't we hang out together here tonight instead of going out? We can watch TV, talk. No big deal. Just be together. Real casual."

"I'm there," Slater said. "I've been running around so much, I feel like a rat in a science experiment. Catch you later."

"Bye!" Alex trilled. She closed the door and leaned against it. "You see? It's perfect."

Alex hurried off toward her closet. She slipped into jeans and suspenders with a pale pink T-shirt. This morning she had a grueling three-hour rehearsal, and she wanted to be comfortable. Then after lunch she could hit the grocery store and do the shopping for tonight.

Grabbing a banana for breakfast, Alex hurried off to the theater. She met Torie flipping through a rack of costumes.

"You're so lucky," Torie said. "You get to have a costume designed just for you. Even if it *is* brown," she whispered. "The rest of us have to find stuff from old shows. These are from *Oklahoma.*" Torie took out a tired-looking green dress. "Yuck."

"If you add some lace around the neck, it might be nice," Alex suggested. "And that green will come alive under the lights."

"Maybe you're right," Torie said, cheering up.

"So what's up with you? Any more problems with Miss High and Mighty?"

"Merlin?" Alex said, laughing. "No way. I'm concentrating on romance at the moment. I know things are going to get crazy over the next few weeks with this accelerated rehearsal schedule, so I'm planning a big romantic dinner for Slater. Slater loves food *and* me—but I'm never sure about the billing. Tonight I'm going to combine the two for a spectacular extravaganza!"

Torie giggled. "Sounds like fun. I'll bring my fork."

Alex shook her head, her curls bouncing. "No way, José. My suite is off-limits tonight. All my roommates promised to stay away."

"Good luck, girlfriend," Torie said. "Don't burn the toast."

"Bruscetta," Alex corrected.

The two girls were quiet as they silently surveyed the rest of the dresses. Then the dressing room door opened behind Torie, and Merlin came out. She looked surprised to see the two girls, but she said hello and hurried down the hallway.

"Do you think she heard?" Alex whispered in a worried voice.

"No way," Torie answered her. "That dressing room door is really thick. And we weren't talking very loudly."

Alex nodded, but she wasn't so sure. She and Torie had a tendency to get carried away sometimes. If their voices had risen, Merlin could have heard.

But what did it matter? Alex thought. Her plans with Slater were absolutely firm. Tonight was the night!

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Zack stood at the automatic teller machine and requested his balance again. It still flashed the same number. Cash had not miraculously floated into his account. He sighed.

He had the deposit covered. And he had scraped up enough for the first month's rent. He only had one small problem: How was he going to eat for the next month?

He couldn't ask his parents. They'd flip if they found out he'd moved out of the dorms and into a luxury apartment complex. He could hear his father's sigh. *Zack, when are you going to grow up?* They wouldn't understand that heartache was pushing him out the door.

No, he couldn't tell them about the move until he had lined up a job and had everything covered. Or at least until right before they were coming up to visit.

Zack turned around and trudged off. The prob-

lem was, it was too late in the semester to snag a part-time job. They'd all been taken by students. And it was too early in the semester for anyone to quit.

He'd asked Slater about the Falcon's Nest, but there were no openings. He'd made the rounds of the coffee shops and the copy shops and the bike shops, even though he could barely handle shifting gears on his old ten-speed. Nothing had panned out.

Zack headed for his next class, Modern American Literature. Outside on the steps he saw one of his classmates eating a powdered doughnut.

"Hey, Dewey," Zack greeted him. "How's it going?"

"Great," Dewey said, brushing powdered sugar off his jeans. "Super, in fact. I just found out I got this scholarship from my hometown. The Associated League of Secondhand Shops chose me for their Send a Local to College Fund."

"That's nice," Zack said.

"My aunt runs a secondhand shop in Minerville," Dewey added. "She's the one who told me to apply. I never expected to win."

"That's great, Dewey," Zack said distractedly. Why didn't *his* aunt run a secondhand shop? Some guys had all the luck. "Congratulations."

Dewey finished the doughnut. "It's not a lot of money, but at least I can quit my job."

"Yeah," Zack said, starting up the stairs. He did a double take. "You can what?"

"Quit my job," Dewey said amiably, standing up and dusting off the seat of his jeans. "I'm going to do it right after class. It was the dream job of all time, too. But this way I can have more time to spend with Allison. Do you know Allison Pulchick? She—"

"Wait a sec, Dewey," Zack interrupted. "I'm sure she's incredible. But could you tell me more about this dream job? I'm looking for some work."

"Sure," Dewey said. "It's at the dairy science building. I wash all the glassware for the lab experiments."

Zack felt his stomach thump in disappointment. Washing laboratory glassware wasn't his idea of a dream job. Dewey would probably get along really well with Screech.

Dewey laughed at the expression on Zack's face. "I know. Dullsville, right? But here's the dream part. They don't *do* any experiments. I'd show up for my shift and there'd be like, three petri dishes to wash. The rest of the time I'd just plug into my Walkman and do my homework. The job is cake, Zack. I got all my studying done while I was at work!"

Zack brightened. Suddenly, the job sounded just about perfect. He was already worried about a job crowding into his study time. This way, having

to slave part-time wouldn't affect his grades one bit! And if his grades didn't suffer and he covered the rent, his parents wouldn't freak when he told them he'd moved.

"I see your point, Dewey," he said. "It does sound pretty workable. But can I get it?"

"No sweat, man," Dewey said. "Just come with me after class. I'll introduce you to Dr. Algernon Perbutter. He's head of the lab. He'll hire you on the spot."

Zack whistled cheerfully as he headed to class with Dewey. After class, he'd snag a job. Then it was time to move all his boxes to his new pad. *Sierra Square, here I come!*

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Slater kissed Alex good-bye at the door of the Falcon's Nest. "Thanks for having lunch with me," he murmured. "I never knew grilled cheese could be so romantic."

Alex ran a finger down his T-shirt. "We had tuna fish," she purred.

Slater grinned wickedly. "Who noticed?"

Alex laughed. "See you later, slugger." Wagglin her fingers in a wave, she headed off down the walk

Slater hurried back inside before Solly checke the clock and noticed that his break was over fiv

minutes earlier. But he'd just picked up his waiter's pad when he saw Merlin walk in.

"Hi!" she said, walking toward him. "I could use a decaffeinated iced tea *real* bad."

"Let me show you to your table, madam," Slater said. He ushered her to the back table in the corner and handed her a menu. "Tough day?" he asked sympathetically.

Merlin shrugged. Her green eyes looked cloudy and sad. "It's okay."

"Tell me what's wrong, Merlin," Slater urged gently. "Come on. We're friends, remember?"

Merlin bit her full lower lip. "I don't want to sound like a baby."

"You won't," Slater said. "Tell me."

Merlin sighed. "Well, I'm worried about moving."

"We've gone over that," Slater said encouragingly. "Sherry and Janine are really excited about getting to know you."

"No, I mean I'm worried about *moving*," Merlin explained. "My stuff, I mean. I know it sounds like a weird problem. I could afford to hire ten moving vans if I needed to, right?"

"Right," Slater said. "So what's the problem?"

Merlin trailed her finger along the table. "The problem is, nobody moves into the dorms that way. They either have parents or friends to help. Can you

imagine how it would look if a big van pulled up in front of my dorm? People would think I was totally stuck-up."

Slater blew out a sigh. "I see what you mean," he said.

"I really don't want to start off on the wrong foot," Merlin said earnestly. "But I don't know what to do. I don't have any friends to help."

"What are you saying?" Slater asked. "Who's standing right here in front of you? And *don't* say your waiter."

Merlin smiled. "Oh, A. C. I'm sure you have a million better things to do."

"Merlin, I'd be glad to help out," Slater assured her. "What are we talking, some boxes and clothes and things, right?"

Merlin nodded. "I'm leaving all the furniture for Zack."

"I can help anytime," Slater said. "How about tomorrow? It's Saturday. I don't have any classes so—"

"I can't do it tomorrow," Merlin said. "I have rehearsals all day. It has to be tonight."

Slater's face clouded. "I can't tonight. I have a date with Alex."

"Oh," Merlin said. "That's okay. I'll find some other way. Or I'll do it myself. It will only take a couple of trips."

Slater looked at Merlin's downcast face. He knew there was no one to help her but him. It seemed incredible that he was the only friend of a big Hollywood star, but he was learning about the difference between illusion and reality. Merlin was gorgeous and talented and had the world on a string. But you could have the world on a string and still be lonely.

"I'll do it, Merlin," Slater said.

"What about your date with Alex?" Merlin asked. "I don't want to come between you, A. C. Honestly."

"We were just going to hang out," Slater said. "It was no big deal. And if it's just a couple of trips, we'll be done in no time at all."

A dazzling smile broke over Merlin's face. "Thank you, A. C. You're a lifesaver."

"Don't mention it. Now, let me get that iced tea." Slater hurried off. Alex said she'd be out all afternoon, so he'd leave a message on her machine that he might be late tonight. He'd wait to tell her about helping Merlin move until he saw her in person.

She probably wouldn't be crazy about it, but she'd understand. He had to help. And anyway, it wasn't as though he and Alex had big plans. Alex would take it just fine.

chapter 8

That evening, Screech waited nervously for his new roommate, Porter Van Loon, to arrive. Adjusting to college life was hard enough. He wasn't looking forward to adjusting to living with a stranger.

It didn't matter as much to Slater. He was gone most of the day, and in the evenings, he hung out with Alex. But Screech spent more time in his room, fooling around with his computer or reading. What if he couldn't stand Porter Van Loon? Or what if Porter couldn't stand *him*?

Screech sighed despairingly. Why did Zack have to move out? But he'd been best friends with Zack long enough to know that Zack had his own agendas. He was always coming up with crazy schemes to make his life more exciting. You could depend on him for friendship and loyalty, but you couldn't depend on him to be around all the time.

The door inched open. A tall, slender guy stood there, holding a big box. He had brown eyes and

brown hair and a pleasant face. "Hi," he said. "I'm your new roommate. Porter Van Loon."

"Hi," Screech said. "I'm Samuel Powers. But everybody calls me Screech, so I guess you should, too. Can I give you a hand?"

"That would be great," Porter said in a relieved tone. "I have a bunch of boxes down by the elevator."

Screech followed Porter down the hall. The poor guy had hauled up five boxes of books all by himself. Didn't he have any friends to help? Screech, Slater, and a couple of the guys at the dorm had moved Zack that morning in no time flat.

Porter hoisted up a box. "I haven't met many people this semester," he confided to Screech as they struggled down the hall. "I was living in a single dorm room."

"We're a friendly crowd here," Screech told him. "We usually have dinner together. And there's always someone to hang out with in the living room, if you want."

They dumped the boxes and went back down the hall to get more. "That sounds cool," Porter said. "Sometimes I think it's important to interact with humanity. But mostly I like to read and think. My major is marketing, but I'm thinking of changing it to philosophy. Since I've been at school, I've been reading the existentialists. They've blown my mind. Changed my life."

Screech put down a box of books by Porter's bed. "That sounds kind of neat."

"Oh, are you familiar with existentialism?" Porter asked.

"Eggs-essentialism?" Screech said. "Does that mean the regular consumption of dairy products? Zack just got a job in the dairy science lab. He probably knows about it."

"*Existentialism,*" Porter corrected. "It's a philosophy started in France by Jean-Paul Sartre. It starts out with the idea that life is meaningless."

Screech gulped. "That sounds depressing."

"It really isn't, once you understand it," Porter said. "If you're interested, I can explain it to you."

"Sure," Screech said. He wasn't sure he was interested. But he *did* want to make friends.

"Just let me find my espresso maker and I'll brew you a cup," Porter offered. "Do you like espresso?"

"Sure," Screech replied. He wasn't sure what espresso was, but as long as it wasn't coffee, he didn't care. Screech couldn't stand coffee, and everyone at college drank it. He guessed he wasn't sophisticated enough.

College could be lonesome, Screech knew. Maybe he'd depended too much on Slater and Zack. They had their own lives. But things were about to

change, Screech felt sure. Making friends with Porter was turning out to be a breeze!

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Slater surveyed the mound of boxes in Merlin's bedroom with dismay. "I thought you said it would only take a few trips," he said.

"Do you think it will be more?" Merlin asked, looking around. "I never moved myself before. I mean, there were always people to pack for me and stuff."

Slater sighed. He opened a closet door. "You haven't even packed all your clothes yet!"

"Well, I thought I'd just throw them in garbage bags or something," Merlin said. "It won't take long if we work together."

"I'd better call Alex again," Slater said. "I left a message saying I'd be a little late. But this is going to take longer than I thought."

"Oh, we'll be done soon, Slater," Merlin assured her. "I'm a real fast worker. And I told Zack I'd be moved out by eight o'clock. He'll be back from work then."

"I'll just give her a quick buzz," Slater said. He punched in the suite's number, and a few seconds later the machine came on.

"Hey, Alex, it's me. I'm going to be a little later

than I thought. But we're still on," Slater said. "Catch you later."

He hung up and turned back to the boxes. "Okay," he said. "Let's get started."

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In the shower, Alex rinsed her hair and belted out a lusty version of "Tonight" from *West Side Story*. She'd played Maria in high school, and she knew the words by heart.

Still humming, she stepped out of the shower and rubbed herself dry. She was kind of glad that Slater had left a message that he'd be a little late. It gave her more time to get gorgeous.

The lasagna was bubbling in the oven. The tomatoes and basil were chopped for the *bruscetta*. She'd chopped up some celery and carrot sticks and had made a yogurt dipping sauce for an hors d'oeuvre. Now she could concentrate on her appearance.

Her crushed velvet dress in a deep wine color was laid out on the bed. It was Slater's favorite outfit. Leslie had loaned her her garnet earrings before heading off to a concert with friends. Screech and Porter had gone together to a French film, and Kelly was playing pool and eating pizza with a group from the second floor. They had all promised to stay out late.

Alex smiled at herself in the mirror as she

sprayed on some perfume. She couldn't wait to see Slater's face when he walked through the door. She couldn't wait to start their perfect evening.

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Slater grunted as he dumped the last box on the floor of the bedroom Merlin would share with Sherry and Janine. He had left a tiny path to get to the door to the living room. Sherry and Janine had long ago retreated to the Student Union. Their faces had become more and more dismayed as box after box of Merlin's things came through the door.

Slater groaned and stretched his back. He was glad the job was over. He was tired. He was sore. He was starving. The next time a girl asked his help with moving, he'd arrange to have the flu.

Merlin appeared in the doorway. It was incredible, Slater thought. The girl was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. She'd spent the night picking up boxes and packing sweaters and shoes. And she looked as gorgeous as when she had started. He felt like he was about to keel over.

"I just ordered a pizza," she said. "The least I can do is buy you dinner."

Slater looked uneasily at his watch.

"Come on, A. C.," she said. "You're starving. And it will be here in two seconds. I put a rush on it."

Slater sighed. "Okay. Maybe just a slice. And then I really have to get going."

Merlin's face broke into a smile. "Great. Let's go into the living room. I'll get us a couple of sodas."

Slater followed Merlin into the living room of the suite. He dropped wearily onto the couch.

"You look tired," Merlin said sympathetically. She opened two cans of soda and handed him one. "I worked you too hard."

"It's not just that," Slater said, yawning. "The Falcon's Nest was jammed today. I never stopped running. And I had an intense wrestling practice early this morning, too."

Merlin sipped at her soda. "I don't know how you fit everything in," she said.

"I don't know myself, sometimes," Slater admitted. "But I have to work my way through school. I don't have a choice."

Merlin nodded. "I admire that," she said. "But I wonder about working so hard. The danger could be that you never really experience anything. You never get a chance to reflect on what you're doing. I know what *that's* like."

Slater nodded. He couldn't believe Merlin was so insightful. He felt the very same way! For a minute, he felt confused. He thought he'd written those feelings in his journal. But maybe he'd just thought them. He couldn't remember.

"You look drowsy," Merlin said. "Why don't you lie back for a minute and close your eyes? The pizza will be here in a second."

"Well, maybe just for a minute. But if the pizza doesn't get here soon, I have to go," Slater said, leaning back against the pillow and closing his eyes.

He felt as though he'd just rested for a moment when the doorbell rang. Merlin jumped up and ran to the door.

"Shhhhh," he heard her whisper.

"It's all right, Merlin," Slater said. "I'm awake."

"I would have been here sooner, but you gave me the wrong room number," the delivery guy said.

Merlin shoved a bill at him. "Sorry, I just moved in. Here."

She brought the box of pizza in. "I'll just stick this in the microwave for a sec."

"Okay," Slater said, stretching. "I didn't fall asleep, did I?"

"Just for a few minutes." The microwave bell dinged, and Merlin brought him two slices on a plate.

Slater ate them quickly and washed them down with the rest of his soda. He stood up. "What time is it? Did you unpack a clock, by any chance?"

"It's about ten-thirty," Merlin said.

"Ten-thirty!" Slater exclaimed. "How long was I asleep?"

"It wasn't long—"

"I have to get going," Slater said quickly.

"Sure," Merlin said. "Say hi to Alex for me. And thank you, A. C. You saved my life."

Slater ran all the way back to the suite. He knew Alex was just hanging out and watching TV, but he hoped she wouldn't be angry. He shouldn't have fallen asleep like that. Too much in a hurry to wait for the elevator, he took the stairs two at a time.

When he burst into the suite, he smelled trouble. It smelled like burned lasagna. It even *looked* like burned lasagna. The congealed dish was sitting in the middle of the dining table.

In a glance, Slater took in Alex in wine-colored velvet, candles burned down to nubs, and charred Italian bread. He knew he was in the doghouse.

He said the only thing he could under the circumstances. "Hi."

"Where have you been?" Alex demanded. "I've been waiting for you all night. You didn't explain on the phone. I tried calling the Falcon's Nest, but Solly said you weren't there."

"I was with Merlin," Slater said.

Alex slowly rose from the table. Her face had changed from annoyance to outright fury.

Slater held up his hands. "I was helping her move in, Alex! There was nobody else to do it."

"Are you telling me that I shopped and slaved

over a hot stove and wore my very best dress for *nothing*?" Alex cried.

"It looks really good," Slater said helpfully. "A tad on the well-done side, but—"

"It's burned because you're late!" Alex said. "You . . . you . . . philistine!"

"Alex, I'm sorry," Slater said. "Truly."

She poked at the lasagna. "Well, I guess I could heat up a piece," she said grudgingly.

"I ate at Merlin's," Slater said. Alex looked up at him. "Oops," Slater groaned. "I think I shouldn't have said that."

"How could you stand me up like that, Slater?" Alex demanded.

"I didn't stand you up!" Slater insisted. "You said we were just going to hang out together and watch TV."

"So hanging out with me is so boring you can blow it off, no problem?" Alex countered furiously.

"That's not fair," Slater said. "You know what I meant. I didn't know you were planning a special dinner. Now I know why I hate surprises. Alex, it was just a misunderstanding. I'm sorry you went to all this trouble."

"*You're* sorry?" Alex flung back. "Not half as sorry as I am!"

"Hey, wait a second here," Slater said. "I think I know what the problem is. It's not that I'm late, it's

who I was with. This is all about Merlin, isn't it? You're still jealous of her!"

"Of course I am! I'm not crazy!" Alex yelled. "A superstar sex symbol is after my boyfriend!"

"She's not after me!"

"Oh no?" Alex asked. "Well, let me tell you something. Merlin overheard me telling Torie about tonight. She probably arranged this whole move so that you'd be late. She wanted to screw up our night together."

"That's ridiculous," Slater said. "First of all, I *offered* to help Merlin move. And second, she was totally concerned about my getting back here on time."

"I'll bet," Alex snorted. "Why are men so *dumb*?" she asked the ceiling.

"Well, since I'm so dumb and insensitive, I don't know why you wanted to be with me in the first place!" Slater said stiffly. He stomped off to his room and banged the door shut.

Alex burst into tears of frustration. She picked up the burned *bruscetta* and threw it across the kitchen. Thanks to Merlin, her preemptive strike had turned into a big fat dud!

chapter 9

Over the weekend, Zack settled into his new apartment. He couldn't believe how cool the place was. From his terrace, he could see the sparkling blue water of the pool. Around the pool lounged the beautiful people of Cal U. The sound of laughter and shouts wafted up to his apartment all the time, so he never felt lonely.

There was only one thing wrong with this picture: Kelly wasn't one of the beautiful girls lounging by the pool.

Put a sock in it, buddy, Zack told himself sourly. He'd moved here to forget Kelly, not moon about her.

On Sunday morning, Zack rose to peace and quiet. Nobody was yelling "Who wore my purple socks?" Nobody was blasting cartoons on TV. He had the sports section of the paper all to himself. There was no Slater, hanging over his shoulder waiting for him to finish. There was no Alex, burning

another batch of cinnamon rolls. No Screech, bugging him about playing a computer game. Zack gave a contented sigh.

But after only a few minutes, he tossed the paper aside. It wasn't that he was lonely or anything. It was just so *quiet*. He wondered how the gang was doing over at the suite. Maybe he should call.

The doorbell rang, and he sprang up. His first guest! He hurried to answer it. When he opened the door, he was so shocked he couldn't speak. It was a dream come true. It was Kelly.

She smiled uncertainly. "Hi. Am I interrupting? I should have called. I knew I should have called." She thrust a plant at him. "Here. I'll just, you know, get going—"

"Kelly!" Zack finally found his voice. "Don't go. Come in."

"You sure?" Kelly asked, stepping inside. "I just wanted to bring you a housewarming present. It's an African violet. Stupid, huh? I forgot how you kill plants."

"No, it's great. I'll remember to water this one, I promise. I'll put it right here, on the windowsill." Zack set down the plant.

Kelly stopped in the middle of the living room. "Wow," she said, looking around. "This place is gorgeous, Zack."

"Let me give you the tour," Zack said proudly. He couldn't believe it. He'd dreamed for days about having Kelly in his apartment. And now here she was, on his very first weekend!

Taking her arm, he showed her the whole apartment. The garbage compactor. The microwave. The built-in vacuuming system. The Jacuzzi in the tub. The view from the terrace.

Kelly oohed and aahed, just the way he'd hoped she would. But she didn't seem totally thrilled. He knew the difference. When they came back to the living room, she seemed subdued. She ran her hand along the couch.

"It's a great place, Zack," she said. "The kind of apartment you dreamed about living in."

Kelly sighed to herself. It *was* close to Zack's dream apartment. Zack had always wanted a luxury penthouse. She was more interested in a little white house with a yard. Sometimes she wondered *why* they'd been a couple for so long. They really didn't have much in common, if you thought about it.

"Yeah," Zack agreed. "I just thought I'd have to wait until I was out of school and working at an incredibly high-paying job. Instead, I'm still *in* school with an incredibly *low*-paying job."

Kelly smiled. "And here you are."

"Here I am," Zack said, spreading his arms and grinning.

"Well," Kelly said. "I'm happy that you're happy. You are happy, right?"

"I'm happy," Zack said.

"Good," Kelly replied.

There was an awkward pause. That's what Zack hated about this situation with Kelly. They used to always have something to say. Now there was so much that he *wanted* to say that he couldn't think of anything *else* to say. That made for some uncomfortable silences.

The doorbell rang. "That's funny," Zack said, surprised. "I guess it's my day for visitors."

He opened the door. Three pretty girls in bathing suits stood there. "Howdy, stranger. We're the welcome wagon," the three girls chorused.

A tall blond in a baseball cap handed him a child's plastic bucket. "And that is your party-hearty kit," she said. "I'm Kiki, and this is Heather and Marie."

"Hi, girls," Zack said. "You're the best welcome wagon I've ever seen. Of course, I've never actually *seen* a welcome wagon before."

The girls laughed. "The Sunday Brunch Ballyhoo starts in ten minutes," Heather said. "Tube is going to see how many doughnuts he can cram into his mouth."

"What an animal," Marie said cheerfully.

Zack looked in the bucket. There was a pair of

neon-orange sunglasses with palm trees on them. There was a deflated beach ball. And there was a baseball cap that read *Party On!*

"Gee, thanks, girls," he said. "I don't know how I could have partied without this stuff."

Heather looked past Zack to Kelly and waved. "You and your guest are invited," she said. "Be there or be square!"

The girls waved and walked back toward the steps. Zack closed the door.

"So what do you say?" he said. "Want to go? We could grab a few doughnuts before Tube gets started."

Kelly picked up her purse and started inching toward the door. Suddenly, she just had to get out of there. She had to leave Zack to his new life. She couldn't be any part of it. She was only in the way, and it hurt too much.

"Guess I'll have to be square," she said, trying to inject a note of cheerfulness into her voice.

"Wait, Kelly. We don't have to go. We can stay here," Zack urged. "I don't have doughnuts, but I have coffee."

Kelly opened the door. "Have fun, Zack. It's a great apartment. I'm sure you'll be very happy here." She sped through the door and hurried down the open hallway.

Zack watched as she disappeared down the

stairs. Kelly had really blasted out of there. Maybe he should have mentioned that he had toast, too.

¤ ¤ ¤

On Monday, Slater was setting up for the lunch rush at the Falcon's Nest when Merlin came in. She was with a tall, gray-haired man dressed in black leather pants.

"Hi," she said. "A. C. Slater, I'd like you to meet Anton Deronda."

"Hi," Slater said. "I'd shake your hand, but mine's wet. Can I get you guys some coffee? We haven't started the lunch menu yet."

"We're not hungry," Merlin said. A secretive smile played around her lips. "How are you doing, A. C.?"

He shrugged. "Okay." *Not much better than okay,* he thought. He and Alex had made up—sort of. They were *speaking,* but they weren't *talking.* He thought Alex had overreacted the other night, but she thought he was a stupid, macho idiot being taken in by a femme fatale. He could tell by the way she kept rolling her eyes.

"We're shooting the next Bijou Jeans campaign in San Francisco," Merlin told Slater. "Anton agreed to shoot it. I'm so thrilled."

"That's great," Slater said. He'd never heard of Anton Deronda, but he supposed he was famous.

But why were they here? If they didn't want food, and they didn't want coffee, what *did* they want? He had tables to clean.

Anton touched Merlin's elbow, and gave her a nod. Then he turned and walked out. He hadn't even said one word, not even hello.

"Friendly guy," Slater said dryly.

"Don't worry about it. You're in!" Merlin crowed.

"I'm in what?" Slater asked.

"In the money, for starters," Merlin said excitedly. "Anton just approved you as a model in the new campaign! Isn't that fabulous!"

"What?" Slater blurted. "Me? I'm not a model!"

"But you look like one," Merlin said. "With that body, I knew Anton would say yes in a minute. You'll only be an extra. But you'll make more money in three days of shooting than you'd make here in a month!" She looked around the Falcon's Nest. "Maybe two months."

"Wait a second, Merlin," Slater said. "What about the Bijou Jeans people? And the advertising agency? Don't they have to approve me or something?"

"I picked you," Merlin said. "And Anton approved you. That's all you need."

"Look, don't get me wrong," Slater said. "The money sounds good. But I'm no model."

"Can you wear a pair of jeans?" Merlin asked, exasperated. "I know you can. I've seen you do it, and that's all you have to do. I'm the focal point. You just have to stand there and look sexy." She grinned at him. "I think you can handle it, hotshot."

Slater wasn't so sure. Zack would probably jump at the chance. But Slater felt intimidated by the thought of cameras and lights.

Merlin put a hand on his arm. "Listen to me. You'll be fine. And this campaign will be shooting all semester. We have six separate shoots scheduled already. You'll definitely be in each one. Do you hear what I'm saying, A. C.? You can quit this awful job!"

Slater shook his head. "I couldn't give up this job."

"Wanna bet?" Merlin leaned over and whispered how much Slater's paycheck would be.

Slater whistled. "Wow," he said reverently. "I guess I could. If I were sure it was going to happen, I mean."

"You *can* be sure. I'm the boss, remember?" Merlin asked happily. "And this way we can spend more time together. I mean," she said quickly, "as friends, of course. And you'll have more time with Alex."

Slater wasn't sure if Alex *wanted* him to have more time with her. But he had to admit the plan

was pretty flawless. With that kind of money, he could definitely chill out and really enjoy school.

"So when's the first shoot?" he asked.

"I knew you'd do it!" Merlin exclaimed, her green eyes dancing. "It's Friday night, a week from this one."

"What?" Slater asked. "Merlin, that's opening night of your show!"

"I know," Merlin said. "They're letting me go early that night. But the extras have to shoot until ten o'clock." Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh," she breathed. "You'll miss Alex's opening night. I didn't realize. Honestly."

"Can't I get out of the first shoot?" Slater asked. "I can't miss Alex's opening night."

Merlin shook her head. "I'm really sorry, A. C. They need all the extras that night. We'll be shooting for two straight weekends."

"But that means I'll miss every performance!" Slater said worriedly.

"Why don't you talk to Alex?" Merlin suggested. "I'm sure she'll understand. Or if it's really important to her that you be there, she'll tell you that, too. If you have to give up the shoot . . . well, it's your decision."

"I'll let you know," Slater said. He sighed. He knew he had to talk to Alex, but he sure wasn't looking forward to it.

chapter 10

Professor Terrine clapped his hands. "Attention, cast and crew!" he said. "I have an announcement to make."

Alex looked up from studying her script in the front row of the theater. Professor Terrine stood on the stage. His wiry brown hair seemed to be standing up with excitement. He ran a hand through it, making it stick up even more.

"We have sold out every performance," he said in a low, thrilling voice.

The cast and crew burst into applause. That really was news. This was considered a small production for the theater department. Nobody had expected it to sell out. That is, before Merlin Scott Jones came aboard.

"We have people coming from San Francisco, even as far as Los Angeles," Professor Terrine continued. "Critics are coming from national papers. It's a great day for Cal U and a great start for the

new theater fund. Congratulations, one and all. And let's do our very best!"

The students broke out in excited murmurs. Everybody knew what Professor Terrine *wasn't* saying: that none of it could have happened without Merlin.

Alex sighed and returned to her script. She was happy about the news, no question. But she wished Merlin's name wasn't popping up every five minutes.

Just then Merlin slipped into the seat beside her. "Hi," she said.

Alex looked up, surprised. Merlin had never sought her out before. "Hi," she said shortly.

"Listen, Alex, I'm sorry about the other night," Merlin said. "I didn't mean to monopolize your boyfriend, honestly. I hope I didn't mess things up."

"You didn't," Alex said brightly. "Things are fine."

"Good. So that's really something, about the play selling out," Merlin said.

"It's all because of you," Alex said.

Merlin nodded. "I'm just glad that the new theater will get funded. Once in a blue moon, being famous comes in handy."

Alex couldn't help being impressed. Merlin didn't bother to deny that her celebrity had brought

in tickets. Alex grudgingly admitted that she liked how matter-of-factly Merlin treated her stardom.

"The only thing is, that's my problem," Merlin said. "A full house."

"What do you mean?" Alex asked curtly. "That's what every actor dreams about."

"Every *stage* actor dreams about," Merlin said. She tucked her legs up and rested her chin on her knees. "But it strikes fear into the heart of a film actor like me. And everybody's going to show up here loaded for bear. Alex, I know I've been a pain in rehearsals. And I know it's not an excuse, but I'm really scared."

"You are?" Alex asked.

"Come on, Alex," Merlin said softly. "You know I've had trouble learning my lines and pitching my performance to a theater instead of a camera. I'm so afraid I'm not an actor at all. I'm just a movie star who some directors and publicists invented."

"Merlin, you *are* a good actor," Alex said. She couldn't believe she was in the position of comforting Merlin, but she was only telling the truth. "When you relax and forget yourself, you're really powerful. When you panic, well, you lose your concentration. But that's true of all of us. You just have to stay focused."

"But I'm so worried about my performance," Merlin said, her green eyes upset. "I know I'm underplaying some of my scenes. I'm afraid of overacting, so I go in the opposite direction. And Professor Terrine isn't any help. He's in awe of me or something. He hardly ever corrects me."

"I know," Alex said dryly.

"And I'm having trouble memorizing lines, too," Merlin said. "I'm a mess. Oh, Alex, will you help me?" she asked, turning to Alex. "I know I'm the *last* person you'd want to help. I've been a total brat. But for the good of the show, would you? Everybody knows you're the best in the cast."

Alex hesitated. Merlin *was* vulnerable, she realized. She could see why Slater would go out of his way to help her. The only trouble was, Alex wasn't completely sure if Merlin was sincere or not. She *was* a good actor. Even now, when Merlin looked so worried and upset, Alex wondered if she was being conned.

But Alex always believed in giving people the benefit of the doubt, no matter what.

"I'll help you, Merlin," she said. "We can run lines together, if you want. We'll get you letter-perfect."

"Thanks," Merlin said gratefully. "You might not believe this, but I don't have anyone else to ask. Except for you and A. C., I haven't met any friends at Cal U."

"What about Sherry and Janine?" Alex asked. "How's it going with them?"

Merlin shrugged. "They're really nice girls. But they're so tight. They're best friends, and I feel like the odd man out. They never invite me anywhere. It's not that they're excluding me," she said quickly. "It's just that they're used to doing things together. It's funny, but my best friend here at school is somebody I don't even know. It's this guy I'm trading journal entries with in my English class."

"Really?" Alex squeaked. She knew Merlin was talking about Slater. But *Merlin* didn't know she was talking about Slater.

"He's so sweet," Merlin said. "On paper, that is. Of course, he has a girlfriend already. Reading about how he feels about her actually makes me hopeful about relationships."

"What does he say about his girlfriend?" Alex asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Well, he's totally devoted," Merlin said. "And I've learned a lot about *why* he is. For example, what he loves the most about his girlfriend is her independence. They have different interests, apparently. She has her own thing, and she doesn't *need* him. She's strong and self-sufficient, and that's why the guy loves her so much."

"Strong and self-sufficient," Alex repeated. She

wasn't *that* self-sufficient. She liked to lean on Slater sometimes.

Merlin sighed. "I wish I could be like her. I wish I could not *need* someone. I wish I could be strong like that."

"Me, too," Alex said faintly. Obviously, when it came to Slater, it was better not to be vulnerable. He liked the strong, independent version of Alex. Maybe that's why he was so angry when she got jealous. She was being too needy.

She'd better rustle up some independence, pronto. If she didn't, she might lose him!

▫ ▫ ▫

Zack hurried to work, yawning. He was exhausted, but he was happy. Juggling school, work, and parties wasn't easy. But it was worth it. He'd hit five parties so far this week. Sierra Square sure lived up to its reputation.

If only he didn't have to go to class or work. Zack had met the two main party organizers at Sierra Square, Dave "Dino" Dubinski and Greg "Tube" Talbot. They considered school a distraction from the real objective at college: partying. Dino was only taking two classes this semester—tennis and golf!

Last night, Dino and Tube had come to his door

in helmets made of aluminum foil. They'd announced that it was Handmade Headgear Night, so Zack had better get the lead out—or the aluminum foil. Zack had made a turban out of his boxer shorts, and it had been a blast.

Zack pulled open the door to the dairy science building. Maybe he'd drop by the suite after work, just to see how the gang was faring without him. It wasn't like he missed them, he just wanted to see what was up. He'd called a couple of times in the last few days, but nobody had been around.

He hurried down the hall to the lab. Dewey had been right, the job was a breeze. He'd be able to study for his math test this afternoon after he washed a couple of test tubes.

Zack rounded the corner toward the sinks and gasped in surprise. There were three rolling carts sitting by the sink, and they were all filled with dirty petri dishes and test tubes! Zack sniffed the air. What was that terrible smell?

"Sour milk?" he said out loud.

Professor Perbutter came hurrying by. "That's right. We're starting a new experiment today. Isn't it exciting?"

Zack surveyed the dirty glassware. "Personally, I'm thrilled," he said hollowly.

"We're all in this together, Zachary," Professor Perbutter said. "I typed out the washing instructions

and posted them over the sink. Hot rinse, then cool rinse. Don't forget!" He scurried away, his white lab coat flapping.

Zack snapped his hands into rubber gloves and turned on the taps. He squirted soap and watched the sink fill. So much for studying at work. He'd have to stay later and show up late to Indoor Miniature Golf Night at Tube and Dino's that night.

Zack plunked the first tray of dishes into the sink. If Professor Perbutter's experiment didn't end soon, his dream job could turn into a nightmare. And his hands could turn into the claws of the Creature from the Black Lagoon!

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Screech sipped his espresso. He was almost getting to like it now, but that didn't really matter. The important thing was how sophisticated he looked drinking it.

Maybe he should try writing poetry. Porter said he didn't think it would be wimpy. He said it would be *très* awesome.

Screech opened his notebook.

Unfair
by Screech Powers
If there is no meaning
in anything
why are there dictionaries?
If there are no answers

anywhere
why study?

There was a knock on the door, and he went to answer it. He walked slowly. When you had so much on your mind, you could feel kind of top-heavy sometimes.

"Hey, buddy!" Zack said. "What took you so long?"

"Hi, Zack," Screech said. "What's that smell? Do you have milk in your backpack? I think it's sour."

"It's nothing," Zack said. "How's it going, pal?" he asked, walking into Screech's bedroom. "Ah, the old room. It looks so . . . small."

"A small room in an empty, endless universe," Screech said with a sigh.

"Huh?" Zack asked. He stared at Porter's bedspread. It looked kind of strange on Zack's bed. "How are you getting along with Porter?"

"Great," Screech said. "Even though there are immeasurable distances between any two people, Porter and I have made a fragile connection."

"Huh?" Zack asked.

"We're friends," Screech explained. "I'm learning to like black coffee, and Porter lets me wear his beret. What do you think?" Screech looked in the mirror and tilted the beret so that he looked more like Jean-Paul Sartre.

"That's great, Screech," Zack said, puzzled. "But are you having fun?"

Screech shook his head, his frizzy curls flying. "Oh, no. None at all. It's great!"

"Huh?"

"You don't understand, Zack," Screech insisted. "Everyone sees Porter as a gloomy guy. They don't realize what he knows."

"What's that?" Zack asked.

"That life is meaningless!" Screech crowed. "We are all strangers trapped in existence with no exit. Why did I think that college was supposed to be *fun*? I was so naive, Zack. Porter explained everything to me. Fun is merely making noise in the void."

"In the what?" Zack asked.

"The *void*, Zack," Screech cried fervently. "That's where I'm living!"

"I thought you were living in the dorms," Zack said.

Screech picked up a pair of dark sunglasses and put them on. "The void is the nothing around us. Life consists of being and nothingnesslessness. You see?"

"No," Zack said. "And neither will you, if you wear those indoors."

"I'm seeing clearly for the very first time," Screech said emphatically.

"Sure, Screech," Zack said. "But watch out for the—"

Clunk!

"Wall," Zack finished.

chapter 11

"So that's the story, Alex," Slater said. He and Alex were having a cup of coffee at the Falcon's Nest. "I can miss the first shoot if you really need me there on opening night. I mean that."

Alex looked across the table into Slater's soft brown eyes. It was taking all her self-control not to wail, *Yes! I need you! I don't know how I can do it without you!*

But she couldn't be needy, because she didn't want to lose him. She had to be strong.

She circled her hands around the Styrofoam cup of coffee. Staring down at the brown liquid, she told herself to pretend this was an acting exercise. She took a deep breath and visualized pulling breeziness over her head like a comfortable sweater.

"Of course you have to go on the shoot," she said. "I completely understand. I'll be fine, Slater."

"You will?" Slater asked.

"Absolutely," Alex affirmed.

"Are you *sure*?" he asked worriedly. Alex was taking this much better than he'd thought she would.

"I'm sure," Alex said.

"You know, once they get to know me, they might cut me a break and let me out early one night," Slater said. "So even if I miss opening night, that doesn't mean I definitely won't be able to see the play later on."

"Right," Alex said.

Slater sighed. "I know that things between us haven't been so great lately. I don't want you to be mad at me."

"I'm not mad," Alex said. "Look, Slater. You have your thing. I have my thing. And sometimes the things shall meet, but not always. No problem. Honestly." *Didn't Merlin say "honestly" all the time?* Alex thought. But did she say it when she knew she *wasn't* being honest, like Alex was now?

"You're the best," Slater said. "This opportunity is incredible, Alex. I can quit my lousy waiter's job."

"What?" Alex asked. "You're going to quit working at the Falcon's Nest?"

Slater waved his hand around the café. "Who needs it? If I get to work on the whole campaign, I'll make plenty of money. And I *will* get to be on every shoot. Merlin is the boss, practically. They'd do anything to make her happy."

"But what if Merlin changes her mind?" Alex asked. "What if she drops out of school, or has a tantrum, or the two of you have an argument?"

Slater scowled. "There you go, trashing Merlin again. Not to mention thinking of worst-case scenarios."

"I'm not, Slater," Alex protested. "I'm just saying that it might not be such a good idea to depend on one person for your job."

"I already do," Slater pointed out. "I depend on Solly."

"That's different," Alex said. "Solly has been running the Falcon's Nest for years. But we don't know how reliable Merlin is. We don't really *know* her, Slater."

"I do," Slater said, his jaw set stubbornly. "You forget that I knew her for *weeks* before I met her. Merlin wouldn't let me down."

"But what if she *does*?" Alex persisted. "Slater, it was hard to get this job. If Solly replaces you, he can't fire that person if you want your job back."

"I won't *need* my job back," Slater said, annoyance creeping into his voice. He sighed. "Look. I don't want to fight. We've been doing too much of that lately."

"That's for sure," Alex agreed.

"So case closed." Slater leaned over and kissed her. "I have to get to class."

"Bye," Alex said, giving him a weak smile. Slater winked at her and left.

Kelly and Leslie walked up a moment later. "Hey, girl," Kelly said. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Alex said. "Nothing's wrong. Why do you think something's wrong?"

"Alex, look down," Kelly said gently. "Either a paper shredder moved through here or it's snowing."

Alex looked down at her table and saw that it was littered with tiny pieces of Styrofoam. She'd completely shredded both her cup and Slater's.

"I guess I'm a little upset," she conceded.

Kelly and Leslie slid into chairs at the table. "Slater?" Leslie asked.

Alex nodded. She quickly told the girls about their conversation. "So, I acted like it was fine if he missed the play," she concluded. "Slater seemed relieved."

"Why are you hiding your feelings from Slater all of a sudden?" Kelly asked. "Maybe you should have let him know that you were upset."

"I think so, too," Leslie said. "The job might be too good to pass up, but he should still know that you'll miss him."

Alex shook her head firmly. "You don't understand, you guys. I have the inside track on Slater." She picked up her books and purse and stood up.

"Listen, I have to run. I have rehearsal. I'll catch you later, okay?" Alex turned and hurried out.

"I hope she knows what she's doing," Kelly mused.

"That would be a first," Leslie said, laughing. "You know Alex. Jump first, ask questions later. But she seems to always land on her feet. It's *you* I'm worried about. That was good advice you gave Alex. Why don't you take it?"

"What do you mean?" Kelly asked evasively.

"Maybe Zack should know how much you miss him," Leslie suggested.

"*I* don't know how much I miss him," Kelly said.

"Sure you do," Leslie said cheerfully. "You just won't admit it."

"Let's have that coffee," Kelly said, looking around for a waiter. She really liked Leslie. They were getting to be close. But sometimes she wished her new friend wasn't so darn smart.

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Zack stopped by the suite again, but there was no one around. So he left a note on the butcher counter, saying he'd been by, then had headed off to work.

All of a sudden, everybody at the suite was so *busy*. When he had lived there, he could always count on hanging out with his friends sooner or

later. Now that he had moved out, he felt like he had to schedule an appointment to see them.

Because he was busy, too. Between the piles of petri dishes at the job and the parties at Sierra Square, he got more tired every day. His days were so packed that something had to give—and it always seemed to be sleep.

Last night was Polar Party Night. Everyone had emptied their ice cube trays into the pool for ice-water polo. Tube and Dino were wearing stocking caps and scarves with their Jams. It had been fun, but it had gone on way past midnight.

At least being immersed in chlorine had washed away the smell of his job. Lately, his friends and classmates started sniffing whenever he was around. He had started to tell people that it was his new after-shave, Dairy. But it wasn't exactly popular.

Zack groaned when he saw the dishes piled up, waiting for him. It was worse than ever!

He was so tired. And when was he supposed to do his reading for his marketing class? Zack made a decision. He'd just have to forgo the second rinse Professor Perbutter had told him to do. The dishes were perfectly clean without it. If he left it out, he'd get his work done in half the time. And no one would be the wiser.

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That night, Alex was still at rehearsal and Kelly and Leslie were sharing a bowl of popcorn when Slater walked through the door. He had a worried expression on his face.

Leslie looked up. "What's up?"

"I'm worried about Screech," Slater said. "I just bumped into him and Porter. They're going to the same black-and-white French movie they saw last night. Screech had forgotten to read the subtitles."

"I'm glad you mentioned it," Leslie said. "I'm concerned about him, too."

"So am I," Kelly agreed. "Porter seems like a nice guy, but I'm afraid he's turning Screech into a lifeless blob."

"Screech has dropped all his old activities," Slater said. "He says they're meaningless."

"He says *everything* is meaningless," Kelly agreed. "Even *meaning* is meaningless. I'm not even sure what that *means*."

"He hasn't talked to his electronic buddies on his computer network in days," Slater said. "And he never drops in on the chemistry lab just to see what's going on."

"That's not even the worst part," Leslie put in. "I wasn't going to tell you guys this because I was hoping it was a fluke. But he forgot to feed his pet lizard! I had to feed him those little dead flies. It was disgusting."

"I asked him what was wrong," Slater said. "He said nothing. He said that was life."

"Not only that," Kelly added. "He's drinking espresso. He doesn't even like coffee! And all that caffeine is making him jumpy."

"Tell me about it," Slater said. "He's up all night writing poetry and sighing."

"We have to do something," Kelly declared, her jaw set determinedly. "He's not acting normal. Not that Screech ever acted *normal*," she corrected. "But you know what I mean."

"Maybe we should talk Zack into coming back," Leslie suggested. "I think he misses us. He keeps coming by to see us and leaving notes."

"He just wants to tell us about the great parties he's going to," Kelly said. "And we can't ask him to come back when he's having so much fun."

"Maybe we should fight fire with fire," Slater suggested. "Look, we're definitely going to have a celebration for Alex's opening night, right? Let's make it a huge blowout and invite Zack. Maybe he'll realize that he can have just as much fun in the dorms as at Sierra Square. Then maybe he'll want to come back."

"That's a lot of maybes," Kelly said doubtfully. "Especially when Zack loves Sierra Square like he does."

Slater shrugged. "Well, at least *Screech* will have

fun. Screech loves parties. We'll let him bring his lizard, and we won't talk him out of mixing polka dots and stripes. He'll have the time of his life. Then how can he say life is empty and meaningless? He'll remember that it's *fun*."

"It's worth a try," Leslie said.

Kelly nodded. "Let's do it."

chapter 12

"Oh, Alex?" Professor Terrine called.

Alex turned brightly. She had just been about to leave the theater. Maybe Professor Terrine was finally going to tell her how great she was doing.

"Yes, Professor Terrine?"

He frowned over his glasses at her. "Merlin was supposed to pick up these line changes, but she had some kind of business in San Francisco. Do you think you could drop these off at her room?"

Leave it to Merlin to get a delivery service for line changes. "Of course, Professor Terrine," Alex said, resigned. "I'd be glad to."

She took the envelope from him and started outside. It was a beautiful day. Rays of sunshine slanted through the trees, casting lacy shadows on the lawn. But the blue sky only made Alex feel more melancholy. If only things were going better with Slater!

When they first started dating, Alex had to admit that most of her attraction to Slater was physical.

She loved his dimples; and his muscles didn't hurt, either. But once she'd really gotten to know him, she'd found that underneath the jokes, Slater was a caring guy. And she didn't want to lose him.

Alex reached Merlin's dorm room and knocked. Sherry answered the door. She was a petite girl with fuzzy blond curls and a wide-eyed, spacy look in her blue eyes. But Alex knew that Sherry had aced every single test in advanced calculus so far and was planning to be a mathematician. Janine was an engineering major.

The two girls couldn't be more different from Alex, but they'd struck up a friendship in Astronomy 101. Alex was so confused in the class that she'd burst out crying in the middle of the professor's lecture on the Doppler effect. Afterward, Sherry and Janine had approached her and offered to include her in their study group.

"Hey, girlfriend," Sherry greeted Alex. "Where have you been hiding?"

"At rehearsals," Alex said with a grimace. "I used to have a life, but not anymore."

Sherry laughed. "Come on in."

Janine was mashing avocados for guacamole. "You're just in time for a snack," she told Alex. "Sherry and I have been studying for hours. Our eyeballs are fried."

"Mmm, don't tell me you're serving them," Alex

quipped. "Because I had fried eyeballs for breakfast."

The two girls laughed. "So what brings you here?" Sherry asked. "Did you have another breakdown in class?"

"Not lately," Alex said. "Actually, I came by to drop off line changes for Merlin."

A funny look came over Sherry and Janine's faces. They looked sort of frozen, Alex thought. Maybe because they were too nice to gossip. But obviously, something was wrong.

"How's it going?" she asked casually, dropping the envelope on the counter. "With Merlin, I mean. Are you all getting along?"

Janine rubbed a freckled cheek. "Um, sure."

"Sure," Sherry said. "Have a chip."

Alex took a chip and dipped it in the guacamole. "Mmm," she said, tasting it. "Delicious. You girls wouldn't be lying to me, would you?"

Sherry and Janine didn't say anything for a minute.

"Look, we're not best friends with Merlin, if that's what you mean," Sherry said.

"We don't really see her much," Janine said evasively.

Alex threw down the chip. "Come on, girls. If you have something against Merlin, you have to tell

me. After all, I set up this whole thing. I don't want you to hate me."

"We don't hate you, Alex," Sherry assured her. "We don't blame you at all."

"Ah-ha!" Alex said in her best Sherlock Holmes voice. "So you *do* have a problem with Merlin. Come on. Dish."

"Well," Janine said, "it's nothing *specific*."

"Right," Sherry said. "Besides her monopolizing the phone and eating our food."

"And making us do her laundry," Janine said.

"How does she do that?" Alex asked.

"Oh, you know how it is," Sherry said. "You're heading out with your basket, and you say, 'Can I wash something for you, Merlin?'"

"And she says, 'Oh, could you just do this one little T-shirt?'" Janine continued. "And 'Oh, would you mind if I just threw in these jeans?'"

"'And a couple of pairs of socks?'" Sherry said, making a face. "Before you know it, you're doing two loads of her wash."

"She never has quarters. And then she complains that you didn't use fabric softener!" Janine finished.

"I'm really sorry, guys," Alex said. "I had no idea."

"It's not just that she's a pain as a roommate,"

Sherry said. "That stuff is pretty petty. We know that. But we really don't like her style."

Janine nodded at Sherry. "Sherry and I just don't like the way she operates. One night the two of us were complaining about not having boyfriends. And Merlin said we just weren't *creative* enough. She said she'd decided that she'd have a boyfriend within a week of getting here, and she practically does already."

"Who?" Alex asked curiously. If Merlin had a boyfriend, Slater just might be off her hook!

Sherry shrugged. "Some guy in her English class. But get this. When she first got to school, she was supposed to trade these journal entries with some student. So Merlin staked out the drop-off point and saw how cute he was. Then she wrote these drippy, lonesome entries so he would want to befriend her."

"She did?" Alex squeaked. "You mean she pretended to be lonesome and scared?"

Janine nodded. "Isn't that the lowest thing you ever heard? The poor, dumb guy."

"I wouldn't feel sorry for him, if I were you," Alex muttered.

"Alex, are you feeling okay?" Janine asked. "Your face sort of looks the color of the guacamole."

"I feel fine," Alex said. "I feel great. Better than I have in *weeks*!"

Because now she knew for sure that Merlin was after her boyfriend. She had the goods on her at last!

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Alex couldn't wait for the end of rehearsal. Slater was picking her up after his shift, and they were going to walk home together. She'd have the privacy she needed to tell him what she'd learned.

Professor Terrine called a halt at eleven, and Alex grabbed her cotton cardigan and went outside to wait for Slater. She called good-byes to the rest of the cast and crew as they headed toward home. Watching them go, Alex realized that Merlin still hadn't found time to run lines with her. It was probably just a ploy to soften Alex up. That girl was something else. And in a matter of minutes, Slater would know it!

Slater showed up a few minutes later. They were just turning to walk home when Merlin came out of the theater. Alex stifled a groan.

"I'm glad you guys haven't left yet," Merlin said breathlessly. "Would you mind if I walked with you? I'm kind of afraid to walk alone this late."

Alex frowned. She was dying to point out that there had been plenty of people to walk with five minutes ago, but she didn't.

"No problem," Slater said.

But Alex wasn't going to let Merlin get away with it this time. "Actually, Merlin, I kind of wanted to talk to Slater alone," Alex said sweetly. "Would you mind if we called the campus escort service for you? We'll wait with you until they come."

"Alex, what are you talking about?" Slater asked, surprised. "We're heading to the dorm right next to Merlin's."

"But I wanted to talk to you about something," Alex said, giving him a meaningful glance.

"We can talk when we get back to the suite," Slater said.

"That's okay, A. C.," Merlin said. "I'll just walk by myself. I'm sure I'll be fine. I don't mind, honestly."

"Honestly?" Alex asked sarcastically.

"Alex, what's gotten into you?" Slater scowled. "Come on, girls. We could have been home by now." He started down the walk, Alex and Merlin on either side of him.

"Well, if you're sure," Merlin said. "I *do* get kind of nervous this late."

"Oh, give me a break," Alex suddenly burst out. "I feel sorry for the mugger who tangles with you, Merlin. Don't you take kick-boxing lessons in Hollywood?"

"Alex!" Slater said.

"Slater, I can't help it," Alex said. "She's such a phony. You just can't see it. Do you know that your

mystery girl staked out the Student Union? She knew who was writing those entries all along! And she made up all that waif stuff so you'd feel sorry for her and want to meet her. She just wanted to snag a boyfriend because she can't stand being alone for five seconds. She's no more of a waif than . . . than . . . Arnold Schwarzenegger!"

"What?" Slater said in a shocked tone. He ran his hand through his curls. "I don't believe this. Merlin, is it true?"

Merlin gave Alex a poisonous look, but when she turned to Slater, her face was contrite. "Partly," she admitted. "I *did* stake out the Student Union, A. C. But it was only because I got to like the guy who was writing those entries. I don't know where Alex heard this, but it's all twisted around. I wasn't looking for a boyfriend." Merlin's eyes filled with tears, and her voice went soft and low. "I was looking for a friend."

Slater's face softened. He was *buying* this, Alex thought in disbelief.

"Oh, A. C.," Merlin said, "I'm sorry. I'm ruining things for you and Alex. I didn't mean to. Those entries came straight from my heart. I swear. Maybe I was wrong to try to find out who you were. But didn't you do the same thing?"

Slater nodded. "I did." Then he turned to Alex. "After all, I tried to find out who she was, too."

"Your entries touched my soul," Merlin said to Slater. "I thought we could be friends. But friends don't ruin other friends' relationships." Merlin's voice suddenly choked up. "I'm sorry!" She rushed off into the night.

"Merlin!" Slater called. He paused, frustrated. He couldn't leave Alex, but he didn't want Merlin to walk alone. "Alex!" he said. "She ran away!"

"Relax, Slater," Alex said dryly. "Her front door is right around the corner."

But Slater hurried his pace to make sure Merlin got in the door. They saw her run up to it, open it, and rush inside.

"I'm glad she made it okay," Slater said.

"Yeah, a whole fifty yards," Alex said. She couldn't believe it. Merlin had twisted Slater right around her little finger. And there was nothing Alex could do about it!

chapter 13

Early the next morning, Alex, Kelly, and Leslie went for a run on the school's jogging course. Alex puffed out the story as they crunched over pine needles in a grove of trees. She panted out her aggravation as they swung past the Student Union. By the time they got to the big loop around the stadium, Alex had finished her story and paused for breath.

She leaned against a tree for support. "Can you believe how—how—how—" she gasped.

"Dumb guys are?" Leslie panted.

Alex nodded, her light brown eyes huge. She bent over, trying to catch her breath.

Kelly lifted her ponytail up to cool her neck. "It's the combination," she said, breathing hard. "A beautiful girl with problems. Guys can't resist."

Alex was finally breathing normally. She fanned her hot cheeks. "Hey, I've been watching her in rehearsal. I think her eyes might be too far apart.

She's not *that* beautiful. Anyway, when you take away her face and her body, what do you have?"

"Her clothes," Kelly said with an envious sigh.

"Now that she's not wearing those sweatshirts all the time, she looks more gorgeous than ever," Leslie agreed.

Alex fixed them with a deadpan look. "Thanks, guys. You are really cheering me up."

"Sorry," Kelly said in a small voice.

"At least opening night is this weekend," Alex went on, brightening a little. "After the play is over, I won't have to be with her as much. Looking at that face every day is an exercise in severe, crushing depression."

Leslie leaned against the pine tree. "If you ask me, Alex, you're focusing on the wrong thing," she said.

"I know," Alex said dutifully. "I should stop comparing myself to Merlin. I should stop thinking about her perfect face and tell myself that I'm not chopped liver. I should just be myself. I'm a very pretty girl when I fix myself up. Thanks, Leslie. You just saved me a quarter. I don't have to call my mom."

"You didn't save anything. You always call collect," Kelly pointed out. Alex glared at her, and Kelly's mouth snapped shut.

"That's not what I mean," Leslie said. "If you ask

me, your main competition is Merlin's soul, not her body. Slater was falling for her line before he knew who she was, remember? It was those journal entries that hooked him in."

"I know," Alex said. "That's what makes it so awful. Slater is falling for someone who's completely different from the person I know. His Merlin is this anguished, sensitive flower. Mine is a coldhearted, selfish machine. I just know she's a phony and I can't prove it! I need some ammunition. If I could just get my hands on those entries, I—" Alex suddenly stopped, a stunned look on her face.

"What are you thinking, Alex?" Kelly asked, giving her a sidelong glance. "You look like you've been stuffed and mounted."

"You're not thinking of reading those entries, are you, Alex?" Leslie asked suspiciously.

"Alex!" Kelly exclaimed, aghast. "That's private!"

"I know," Alex said.

"And Slater would never forgive you," Leslie said.

"I know," Alex said. *That's why I can't get caught.*

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Zack placed the last petri dish in the rack. Now that he wasn't doing the cool rinse, he had more

time for studying. He'd actually done half his history paper at work yesterday. Dewey was right. This job *was* a breeze.

He untied his apron and hung his rubber gloves up to dry. Then he grabbed his backpack and headed for the door to the hall. Professor Perbutter was coming into the lab, and they narrowly avoided a collision.

"Zachary, my boy!" Professor Perbutter said. "Heading off to class?"

"Yes, Professor," Zack said. "All the dishes are done. Ready for the next experiment."

"Marvelous, marvelous," Professor Perbutter said. His blue eyes were twinkling even more than usual. He leaned closer to Zack. Zack's nose wrinkled. Did *everybody* in this lab smell like sour milk?

"I shouldn't tell you this, my boy," Professor Perbutter said. "Very hush-hush, you know. But you're part of the team. The experiment is proving all my findings. Better than my wildest dreams."

"That's great, Professor," Zack said.

"I'm even thinking . . ." The professor leaned even closer. "Nobel Prize," he whispered.

"That's wonderful, Professor Perbutter," Zack said. "Congratulations."

"I'll keep you posted, Zachary," Professor Perbutter said. Rubbing his hands together, he moved off into the lab. *He probably can't wait to get his*

hands into some moldy cream cheese, Zack thought as he ran down the hall.

Zack was overscheduled to the max. He was getting only about four hours of sleep each night. Nobody at Sierra Square had early morning classes like he did—"Dude, never sign up for a class before two o'clock!" Tube had instructed him—and parties went on until the early-morning hours.

Last night's barbecue had gone on past three and had ended with a medley of Led Zeppelin's greatest hits. Zack didn't get a wink of sleep. Why did he have to get an apartment overlooking the pool?

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Alex waited until Slater left for his shift at the Falcon's Nest. Thank goodness he hadn't quit yet. She knew everyone else had a three o'clock class, so the coast was clear. She tiptoed into the guys' room. It was a mess, as usual. She pushed aside Slater's sweatpants on top of his desk and found his textbooks stacked underneath them.

Alex flipped through the notebooks. She hit pay dirt in the binder on the bottom, where Slater had filed Merlin's entries.

But now the friendly sky that seemed to hug the earth is a cold, blue wall.

Alex gaped at the notebook. Those weren't Merlin's

words. They were Amelia Sandborn's. Merlin had plagiarized her lines from the play!

Alex flipped through the pages. Merlin had lifted whole speeches right from the script! Amelia Sandborn had felt like a stranger in her environment, too. So a lot of speeches seemed to fit. Merlin had just added some sentences or changed a few words here and there.

Alex couldn't wait to tell Slater. But suddenly, Alex stopped. That hadn't worked before. Why would it work this time?

If Slater found out that she had been snooping, he'd be furious. He probably wouldn't listen to a word she said. And since he wouldn't be able to come to the play, he wouldn't find out that way. Was that why Merlin had gotten him the job on the shoot? Alex wondered.

Merlin must have almost passed out when she found out that Slater was her boyfriend. That meant he'd come to the play and find out that she was a phony!

I've got to get Slater to the play somehow, Alex thought. She had to show him that he'd been trying to protect an illusion. Not a person, but a character from a play. Because Merlin was a big fake.

"I've got you," Alex murmured.

"Sure you do," Slater said. "But you knew that already, sweetie."

Alex froze as cold chills ran down her neck. Slater had come into the room behind her. She'd been so intent on her thoughts, she hadn't even heard the door.

She turned around, blocking his view of the open notebook. "What are you doing here?" she croaked.

"I live here," Slater said politely.

"I know that. I mean *now*," Alex said.

Slater looked uncomfortable. "I quit my job today." He held up a hand. "I know you don't agree with me, Alex. I don't want to argue. I want to celebrate. How about dinner anywhere *but* the Falcon's Nest?"

"Okay," Alex babbled. "Sounds really good. I'm starving. Let's go."

"It's a little early," Slater said. "Hey, what are you doing here, anyway? Do you need something?"

"Yes!" Alex exclaimed, her light brown eyes wide. "I do. I need to borrow some . . . some . . . sweatpants!" She pointed across the room at the overflowing laundry basket. "Can I have a pair?"

Slater laughed. "I think I can find some clean ones," he said. "I dumped them on the desk behind you."

"No!" Alex shouted. She lowered her voice and tried to smile. "Did I say sweatpants? I meant a stapler."

But it was too late. Slater had crossed the room in a few strides. He looked behind her and saw the open binder.

He didn't say anything for a minute. "What are you doing, Alex?" he asked quietly.

"I had to do it, Slater," Alex said rapidly. "And guess what I found out? Merlin is—"

"Stop it, Alex!" Slater ordered. "I don't want to hear your views on how screwed up Merlin is. Don't you understand? You violated her privacy! Not to mention mine. These journals were to be kept absolutely private between two people. Merlin wouldn't want her most private thoughts to be theater department gossip!"

"What?" Alex sputtered. "Are you saying that I'd *talk* about this?"

"Then what are you doing here?" Slater countered.

"I wanted to see what she was really like!" Alex yelled. "And guess what, Slater. I did! She's an *illusion*! She isn't what you think she is! She—"

"Alex, I've had enough of this!" Slater stormed. "I refuse to discuss Merlin's journal with you. It would be like invading her privacy all over again!"

"But—"

"I've had it," Slater said. "This discussion is over. I'm out of here."

He stalked out of the room and slammed the

door behind him. Alex slowly slid into the desk chair. She gripped the back and stared after Slater with burning eyes.

He hadn't listened. He hadn't *wanted* to listen. He was so worried about protecting Merlin, he hadn't listened to her at all.

It's ten times worse than I'd thought, Alex thought numbly. Her worst fear had come true. Whether Slater knew it or not, it was as clear as day to Alex. He was in love with Merlin!

chapter 14

Slater left the suite early on the day of Alex's opening. He used the door from his room that led straight into the hall so he didn't have to go into the living room or the kitchen. There was no way he'd risk running into Alex.

Slater tried to sort out his feelings on the bus ride to San Francisco and the Bijou Jeans shoot. He was angry at Alex. No question. If there was one thing he hated, it was snoops. He felt as though Alex had ripped his trust to shreds. What kind of a relationship could they have after this?

The bus let Slater off in downtown San Francisco, and he transferred to a cable car to take him down to Fisherman's Wharf. He smelled the salt air and heard the clang of the cable car's bell. He was starting to know his way around San Francisco, thanks to Alex. The thought gave him a pang. They'd had so much fun taking the bus into the city on Saturdays and wandering through the different neighborhoods. Alex had a wide-open, inquisitive

nature and a sense of fun that was contagious. He'd never known anyone like her.

Slater jumped off the cable car at the last stop and hurried down Beach Street. He saw Merlin waving at him down by the water.

"Hi!" she called as he came up. "Are you ready to become a star?"

"Not really," Slater said. He realized that he'd been so caught up in thinking about Alex that he hadn't had time to be nervous.

"Wardrobe is over there," Merlin said, pointing to a long trailer. "You need to change your jeans. We're almost set up for the first shot."

"I'll be quick," Slater promised. "And Merlin? Thanks."

"I'd do anything for you, A. C.," Merlin said.

Slater hurried away. There had been a melting look in Merlin's eyes when she'd said that. Could it be that Alex was right? Was Merlin really after him?

Slater shook his head as he knocked on the trailer door. A gorgeous star like Merlin interested in him?

"Whoa," he muttered under his breath. "Watch out. Ego out of control."

Over the next few hours, Slater found out something he'd never dreamed about big-time fashion modeling: It was *boring*. When he wasn't standing around waiting, he was standing with his back to

the camera while Merlin stood in front of the guys. They were supposed to be unloading fish from a truck. Anton kept yelling "Think blue collar!" at them. But the fish were plastic, and Slater's jeans were so tight he just felt silly.

Merlin had to change outfits every hour or so. Standing around and waiting gave him time to think. *Too* much time. By the time the sun was slipping down toward the horizon, Slater had analyzed the situation with Alex backward and forward. And he'd realized something he didn't want to face.

He was wrong.

Of course Alex was jealous of Merlin! He was always defending the girl. He saw something in Merlin that he wanted with Alex. A little softness, a little vulnerability. A sense that he was *needed*. But instead of being honest and telling Alex that, he just kept pushing her away and putting Merlin between them.

And Alex knew it. That's why she was desperate enough to read Merlin's journal. She was jealous. Maybe she didn't have reason to be, but *she* didn't know that. She probably thought he'd fallen for Merlin!

But he didn't want Merlin, Slater knew. He wanted his stubborn, dramatic, hilarious, exasperating girlfriend.

And instead of being with the girl he wanted, he was stuck here with the fog rolling in from San Francisco Bay, freezing in a pair of jeans two sizes too small. He hadn't sent Alex flowers for her big night. He hadn't even sent her a note.

Merlin was still in her trailer. Shivering in his thin T-shirt, Slater hurried toward Anton Deronda. The photographer looked pretty cozy in a leather jacket, cupping a hot mug of coffee.

"Excuse me, Mr. Deronda," Slater said. "I was wondering if there was any chance I could get off early tonight."

Anton Deronda shook his head. "Sorry, guy. The schedule was worked out two weeks ago. If you wanted tonight free, you should have told Merlin."

"What could she do?" Slater asked, grimacing.

"Merlin was the one who wanted the night shoot for the extras," Deronda said. "Originally, we planned an early-morning thing. Mist rising from the bay, blah, blah, blah. Then Merlin decides she wants a sunset." He shrugged. "That's entertainment."

Slater frowned, puzzled. Merlin said that the timing of the shoot was out of her hands. Why would she want a night shoot?

"Maybe I can talk to her now," Slater said. "Is she still in her trailer?"

Deronda nodded. "Yeah. But I wouldn't go in there, if I were you. I knocked and got the brush-off. She's with a very important visitor."

"Who?" Slater asked curiously.

"Max Verlaine, the director," Deronda said. "Rumor is that he lost the star of the film he just started shooting. Justine Rice. She ran off and got married. So if you want to place bets, I'd put your money on Merlin replacing her. She'd do anything to take over for Justine and win another Oscar. Those two have been rivals for years."

"But Merlin dropped out of movies," Slater said. "She's in school now."

Deronda gave him a pitying look. "Want some coffee, kid?"

"No thanks," Slater said. Feeling a little dazed, he walked toward Merlin's trailer. Just before he reached it, the door opened and Merlin skipped out. She waved when she saw him and ran toward him, her cheeks flushed.

"Guess what, A. C.!" she said breathlessly. "Max Verlaine wants me for his film! He flew in a few days ago to see me. He *said* he just dropped in to say hi. But I knew he was checking me out for the role. He's probably afraid I'm as unstable as that drip Justine. I've been waiting for him to pitch me, and he just did!"

"Merlin, I really need to talk to you," Slater said. "Anton Deronda just said that—"

"A. C., I don't have time!" Merlin exclaimed. "I'm looking for Angie, my assistant. That girl is probably flirting with the models again. I need her to get Max some coffee."

"Do you mean you'd consider doing a film?" Slater asked in disbelief.

"Are you kidding? This could get my career out of the dumpster. I thought I was *finished* in Hollywood," Merlin declared.

"Come on, Merlin," Slater said. "You did one film that didn't do well. You're barely nineteen!"

"You don't know Hollywood," Merlin said darkly. "Now, as soon as we set up a conference call with my agent, we'll nail down the terms."

"What about the play?" Slater said.

Merlin looked blank. "The play?"

"Tonight is opening night!" Slater reminded her. "You should be leaving right now."

Merlin frowned impatiently at him. "I'll leave soon, A. C. Don't be such a worrywart. This is important. Now, could you *please* find Angie for me?"

As Merlin ran back to her trailer, Slater turned away thoughtfully. He'd never seen Merlin look so happy. Could it be that she was just like Alex said?

Maybe he was an even bigger jerk than he'd imagined.

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Alex arrived at the theater early. She'd paced so much back at the suite that Leslie had suggested she head to the theater before she wore out the rug.

She was slipping out of her jacket when there was a knock at the door. Hoping it was Slater, she ran to it and threw it open.

Professor Terrine blinked at her. "Have you seen Merlin?" he barked.

Alex shook her head. "I just got here."

"Where *is* she?" Professor Terrine asked nervously.

"It's still early," Alex said. "She has time to get here."

"She was supposed to come early to go over those line changes," Professor Terrine said. He bit the end of his mustache, something he only did when he was really nervous.

"Don't worry," Alex said. "She's shooting a jeans ad in San Francisco today. Maybe she got hung up. I'm sure she'll be here soon."

"She'd better be," Professor Terrine said darkly.

He walked away, and Alex closed the door. Thinking of Merlin reminded her of Slater. And thinking of Slater made her upset. She didn't want to lose her concentration.

Alex tried some relaxation exercises, but she couldn't stop thinking about Slater. He hadn't sent her roses or even carnations. He hadn't called. He hadn't written a note. She knew they weren't speaking, but couldn't he have done *something*?

¤ ¤ ¤

Zack knocked softly on the door of Professor Perbutter's office. He heard a jovial "Come in," and stuck his head inside the door.

"Just wanted to let you know that I finished up," Zack said. "I have to leave a little early. My friend is in a play at the university theater."

"Fine, fine," Professor Perbutter said. "Enjoy yourself, Zachary. But before you go," he said as Zack began to duck out again, "you'll be interested to know that I ran another experiment to check our results. And everything came out exactly the same way! This means I can announce my results tomorrow to the entire department!"

Zack nodded. "That's great, Professor," he said. He tried to look at his watch without the professor seeing him.

Professor Perbutter licked the end of his pencil. "Just a few details to go over, that's all. Now . . ."

Zack tuned out the professor as soon as he heard the word "details." Just because Dr. Frankenstein was completely obsessed, it didn't mean Zack had to turn into Igor.

"The only thing that could have interfered with the results would be if any bacteria were left on the petri dishes. Now, Zachary, you are conscientious, and I do not wish to offend. But tell me, you *did* do the cool water rinse for the last rinse, eh?"

Zack thought about the evening ahead. There was a party for Alex after the show. Leslie had called to invite him, and he was bummed that Kelly hadn't extended the invitation. Every time he went by the suite, she was out or she disappeared into the bedroom. He'd barely seen her since he'd moved out.

"Because that's how these particular bacteria are killed. Just washing in warm water would cause it to multiply. I'm sure this is true, no? Zachary?"

"Everything's cool," Zack said automatically. He had barely heard a word the professor said.

"Cool! Yes," Professor Perbutter repeated, chuckling madly. "Yes, the cool rinse. Very amusing."

"Uh, Professor? I really have to go. I don't want to miss the curtain."

"Of course, of course." The professor waved him away, still chuckling. "Cool!"

¤ ¤ ¤

Slater borrowed a sweatshirt from one of the other male models and sat as close as he could to a portable heater. He knew Alex was already at the theater, and he couldn't call her there. Maybe after the shoot, he'd try to find some flowers to bring to the party. He'd try every florist in San Francisco if he had to.

He looked at his watch nervously. If Merlin didn't leave in the next five minutes, she'd miss the curtain. He looked over anxiously at her trailer, and the door suddenly popped open. Slater was relieved when Merlin jumped down. She gave him the thumb's up sign.

Slater walked over. "I got it," Merlin whispered to him excitedly. "My agent got my asking price, too."

"When do you start shooting?" Slater asked.

"Next week," Merlin said. "So I have to fly to L.A. tonight to meet the wardrobe people tomorrow morning. Justine is a size bigger than me," she sniffed. "I'm so excited!" She checked her watch. "I don't even have time to do the last set of pictures. Anton is going to freak, but he'll forgive me. I'm going to fly back with Max on the nine o'clock flight. I'll have someone pack my things and send them to L.A."

"What?" Slater asked, shocked. "Merlin, you have a performance tonight."

"Oh. Alex can go on for me," Merlin said. "She'll be better than I would have been anyway. The stage just isn't for me, A. C."

"But they sold out the house because you were the star," Slater argued. "Merlin, you can't let all those people down. What about the new theater? What about Cal U?"

Merlin sighed. "I feel badly, honestly. But what can I do?"

"You can take a later flight," Slater said. "You could at least go on tonight. Whatever happened to 'the show must go on'?"

"The show *will* go on, A. C.," Merlin said. "Don't be so dramatic. And it's just a college production. This is a film! Look, I know you're probably upset about the Bijou Jeans campaign," she added.

"Huh?" Slater said. He hadn't even thought about the campaign.

"Well, it's going to have to be postponed, I guess," Merlin said. "And then we'll probably shoot it in L.A. after all. But I'm sure you could get your old job back."

Slater just stared at her. This was a whole new Merlin. Even her voice had changed. She sounded crisp and confident. Had the girl she presented to him just been an act?

Merlin seemed to relent when she saw the expression on Slater's face. She sighed and bit her lip.

"Oh, A. C., I'm sorry," she said. "I really am. But it was just too hard for me. It's too late for me to be a normal person. And it's too scary. I'm used to having everything done for me. I made this big show of independence with my mother and my agent, and then I got here and I was terrified. That's why I went after you. I wanted to steal you away from Alex because I just couldn't be alone."

"So it's true," Slater said slowly. "Alex was right. It was all an act."

Merlin gave a twisted smile. "Of course she was right. She had me pegged from the beginning. I *did* write those entries just to snag you. Actually, I didn't even . . . well. Look, A. C., I didn't mean any harm. I just . . . exaggerated some things I was feeling so you'd feel sorry for me, I guess. But I really do like you a lot." Merlin leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for trying," she whispered. "But I have to go back to my old life. I wasn't good enough for this one."

Merlin looked sad, and somehow, Slater knew she wasn't faking this time. "You're closer to those entries than you think," he said. "You *are* sad. Merlin, you don't have to leave."

She gazed back at him steadily. "I'd just disap-

point you if I stayed," she said. "I can't be that girl, A. C. Maybe part of me *is* her. Maybe it's the best part of me, but I have to go. I'll never forget you."

"I'll never forget you, Merlin," Slater said.

"I know you belong with Alex," Merlin said. "I'm sorry if I screwed things up for you two. I'd do anything to make it right."

Slater had a brainstorm. "You would?" he asked. "How about lending me your car so I can drive back to school? You have to get it back to campus, anyway. I can't miss Alex's opening night."

Merlin sighed. "Oh, A. C. I'd *love* to help you out. Honestly. But I'm driving Max and me to the airport and leaving the car in long-term parking. It's all arranged. Can't you take the bus?"

chapter 15

Alex peeked out at the theater seats nervously. Merlin had called with the news she wasn't coming. As soon as he'd finished crying, Professor Terrine had decided they had to offer a refund to anyone who wanted one. As a result, half the seats were empty. The other half were filled with disappointed or irritated-looking faces.

Alex swallowed against the lump in her throat. *This is the true test of an actor,* she told herself firmly. She had to go out there and make them forget they had come to see Merlin Scott Jones in the first place. Even if nobody in the audience believed in her, she had to find the will to do her best.

But how? Alex wondered. It wasn't butterflies fluttering in her stomach. It was a herd of stampeding buffaloes.

"Places," the stage manager whispered.

Alex started to turn away. But out of the corner of her eye, she saw a figure rush down the side aisle toward the front. Alex looked closer. It was Slater!

He looked hot and worried and relieved as he found his seat next to Kelly in the third row. He slid into it and wiped his forehead. He looked as though he'd run all the way from San Francisco.

Alex broke into a dazzling smile. It didn't matter how many people were in the audience or how many were waiting for her to fail, because the person who believed in her the most was there.

¤ ¤ ¤

After the performance, the suite was jammed with kids. Slater had made sure that it would be festive by inviting the whole dorm. Those who couldn't squeeze into the suite spilled out into the hallway. Mike Rogers, the resident assistant of their floor, had barricaded himself in his room with earplugs and a sack of burgers from Hamburg De-Lite. He said he would reappear at midnight to throw everyone out.

Screech sat in a corner with Porter. Normally, he'd be jumping around in his favorite outfit—striped purple pants and an orange polka-dotted silk shirt—and trying to meet girls. It was so much cooler, he realized now, to sit separate from the action, sipping black coffee and wearing a black turtleneck.

A pretty redhead skipped by them, her head

bobbing to the music. "Party on! Excellent!" she called cheerfully to them.

"How depressing," Screech said with a sigh. "Right, Porter?"

"Yeah," Porter said. His eyes seemed a little glazed as they followed the redhead.

"I used to like parties," Screech admitted. "Now I realize that fun is meaningless next to the reality of being."

"Who's Bing?" Porter asked.

"*Being*," Screech said. "Existentialism, remember?"

Porter's head swiveled back to watch the dancers. "Right."

Screech took another sip of coffee and adjusted his beret. He looked out into the crowd. "Anyway, I really like poetry readings. I'd much rather be at the Quatrain Café. And, Porter, you were right. Dancing *is* an outmoded tribal rite."

"Absolutely," Porter mumbled.

Just then a brunette with long shiny curls danced over. She held out a hand to Porter. "Want to dance?"

Screech shook his head. "No, he thinks that dancing is an outmoded—"

Screech gaped. Porter was getting up! He was bouncing behind the girl as she led him to the dance floor! And even though Porter thought danc-

ing was an outmoded tribal rite, he was doing the Watusi!

¤ ¤ ¤

Kelly reached for a handful of pretzels and chomped down on them energetically. Maybe if she made enough noise in her head, she could drown out her thoughts. Maybe if she concentrated on food, she'd stop watching the door and wondering when Zack was going to show up.

They'd gotten separated after going backstage to congratulate Alex on a knockout performance. Kelly had been carried along by the wave of laughing, shouting partyers to the suite. Since she'd been here, she hadn't caught a glimpse of Zack.

Maybe it is better this way, Kelly thought, crunching mournfully on a pretzel. She felt too nervous to talk to him at all. She was so confused about her feelings that she was sure she wouldn't know what to say. She'd probably just burst into tears.

Suddenly, Zack popped out of the crowd and leaped past a wiggling dancer to stand beside her. "Whew," he said. "It took me half an hour to get here."

"Did you go home first?" Kelly asked.

Zack shook his head. "Nah. I came in through the bedroom door. This place is jammed!"

Kelly gave a faint smile. "Does it remind you of Sierra Square?"

Zack nodded. "Sure. Except this would be going on every night."

"What's going on there tonight?" Kelly asked. "Are you missing something fantastic?"

"It's Decibel Night," Zack said, wincing at the thought of the pounding his eardrums would take later on, when he was trying to sleep. "Dino and Tube rent a sound system and hook it up to a karaoke machine. It's a blast." Zack winced again.

"Oh," Kelly said. "I guess you'll be leaving soon, then." She looked past Zack at the party. She didn't want him to see how disappointed she was.

"Oh," Zack said. "Sure. Everybody's waiting for me." He smothered a sigh. Obviously, Kelly didn't care that he was here. After all, she was looking to meet new people, have new experiences; so he should, too. Even if he didn't want to.

Just then Kelly's nostrils flared. She leaned closer to Zack. "What's that smell?"

"What smell?" Zack asked, leaning away.

"Something funny . . ." Kelly said, still sniffing. "Sour cream? Buttermilk?"

Leslie was squeezing by them on her way to the refrigerator. "Yogurt that's been in the fridge too long," she corrected.

Zack backed up a bit more. That darn job of his was interfering with his social life! Maybe he *should* do a second rinse—on himself. Or a third or a fourth!

The second rinse . . .

And, just like that, his conversation with Professor Perbutter rolled back through his brain like a movie.

"But tell me, you did *do the cool water rinse for the last rinse, eh? . . . Because that's how these particular bacteria are killed."*

Horror dropped over Zack's head like a really ugly hat. He felt faint.

"Zack? Did you hear me?" Kelly asked. "Do you want a soda?"

And Professor Perbutter was announcing his results tomorrow morning!

"Kelly, I have to run," Zack said hurriedly.

"Sure," Kelly said. "I guess I'll see you . . ."

But Zack was already gone, wiggling through the dancing crowd toward the door.

". . . later," Kelly whispered.

¤ ¤ ¤

"Don't," Alex told Slater. "Really. That's enough."

"You don't want me to tell you how great you were again?" Slater asked.

Alex shook her head. "You've told me ten times already," she said. "Let's talk about something else.

The world doesn't revolve around Alex Tabor, even on opening night. Speaking of opening night, did you really like me?"

Slater laughed and hugged her. "I didn't just like you, momma. I was knocked out. I am totally in awe of your talent. Don't tell anyone this, but you made me cry."

"I did?" Alex said, clasping her hands together. "I'm so happy!"

"And I feel like a prize boob," Slater said. "You knew Merlin wasn't going to last out the semester, didn't you?"

"Well, I had my doubts," Alex said. "That's why I didn't want you to quit your job at the Falcon's Nest. I hope Solly didn't hire anyone yet."

"Me, too," Slater said. "I've got to tell you, Alex. I nearly swallowed my program when I kept hearing those lines and realized that Merlin had plagiarized them. Why didn't I listen to you?"

"Maybe a pair of big green eyes had something to do with it," Alex teased.

"Alex, I was never interested in Merlin," Slater told her seriously. "I'm only interested in you. I just liked being needed, that's all."

"But Slater, *I* need you, too!" Alex assured him. "I was just trying to act all noble and strong because that's what I thought you wanted."

"I don't want you to *act* anything," Slater said.

Alex drew away. "But I'm an actor! Don't ask me to give up my profession, Slater! It's in my blood. I'll never give it up, not even for you!" She struck a dramatic pose, her chin lifted.

"Relax, Sarah Bernhardt," Slater said. He took hold of her chin and lowered it again. "You know what I mean. Save the acting for the stage. And just be yourself with me."

Alex smiled and leaned toward him. They kissed gently.

"Break it up, kids," Leslie said. "We need to talk."

Slater groaned and pulled away from Alex. "Did anyone ever tell you your timing stinks, Burke?"

"Only my ballet teacher," Leslie said with a twinkle in her golden eyes. "Listen up, you guys. Our plan is a big fat bust. The only ones who are happy are Sherry and Janine. They're celebrating the fact that Merlin moved out. Zack just ran out of here like he was trying to break the one-minute mile. Kelly said he was heading back to a party at Sierra Square. She said Zack was standing so far away from her that he could have been in another room. She looks like she's about to burst into tears. And Screech hasn't moved from that corner all night. He's had four cups of coffee and he's shaking like a leaf. Plus, Porter's asked me to dance four times. He yelled poetry in my ear and

kept stepping on my feet. We have to come up with another plan."

Leslie took a deep breath. "Because unless Porter Van Loon goes, I do!"

chapter 16

Somewhere, a phone was ringing. Zack hoped it wasn't in his apartment. He crunched the pillow even tighter around his head.

Decibel Night had been the worst yet. After Tube's twentieth warbling rendition of "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," Zack had been ready to tear his hair out. If he didn't have such a boss haircut, he would have.

Decibel Night had kept him awake. But worrying would have done the same. Professor Perbutter hadn't taken the news that Zack had spoiled his Nobel Prize–winning experiment very well. In fact, he'd canned him on the spot. And Zack didn't blame him a bit.

Which left the question of next month's rent a very interesting one.

Ring!

Zack sighed and thought about last night. Everyone at the suite seemed to have really meshed. Porter and Leslie had danced. Kelly was happily

munching pretzels. Screech had finally stopped wearing that horrible polka-dotted shirt. And Alex and Slater were getting along great.

Nobody missed him at all. Zack turned over and pressed the pillow tighter against his ears as the phone rang again. It was probably Dino, inviting him to some Saturday morning cartoon bash. He had thought the suite was chaos half the time. Now it seemed like paradise.

Ring!

Zack gave up. The caller sure wasn't going to. He took the pillow off his head and rolled over to pick up the phone.

"This had better be good," he said into the receiver.

"Uh, Zack?" Kelly sounded nervous. "Is that you?"

Pillows flew as Zack jackknifed to a sitting position. "Kelly!"

"Did I wake you up?" Kelly asked hesitantly.

"No, no! Of course not. I was . . . I was . . . gardening," Zack improvised.

"Gardening? I didn't know you had a garden," Kelly said.

"Well, I have a *plant*," Zack said. "Remember?"

"Oh, right," Kelly said. "Listen, Zack, I was wondering. Could you come over this morning for breakfast? If you're free?"

Kelly wanted him to come over. Zack's heart

thrashed in his chest like one of Slater's wrestling opponents right before he got pinned. "Sure," he said. "When?"

"Well, how about . . . now?" Kelly asked.

She wanted him *now*. She couldn't wait any longer. She wanted to tell him that she was wrong, that they should be together . . .

"I'm there," Zack said.

▫ ▫ ▫

Zack straightened the collar of his shirt and rang the bell of the suite. Kelly had probably picked the early morning because the rest of the suitemates were either asleep or out starting their Saturday. They would have the living room all to themselves.

Kelly opened the door, looking pretty in a denim romper and yellow T-shirt. "Thanks for coming over," she said.

"Sure," Zack said. "Do I smell blueberry muffins?"

Kelly nodded. "Alex made them."

Zack's face fell. "Alex?"

"And she didn't burn them this time," Kelly whispered.

"I heard that!" Alex yelled.

Zack stepped inside. To his disappointment, Slater, Alex, and Leslie were sitting around the table, drinking coffee and eating muffins.

"The gang's all here," Zack said, trying to sound happy. "Where's Screech?"

"That's why we asked you here, Zack," Kelly said. "We wanted to talk about him."

"He's out with Porter," Slater explained. "They went to an early-morning poetry reading. We have a little time."

"We're really worried about him," Leslie said. "Haven't you noticed how he's changed?"

"Actually, I have," Zack said, sitting down. Kelly put a steaming mug of coffee in front of him. "He kept saying how he's realized that nothingnesslessness is the meaning of existence. Whatever that means."

"He's completely different," Slater said. "He's not the dweeb he was. I never thought I'd say this, but I want the dweeb we knew and loved back."

"It's all Porter's fault," Leslie said. "He's not a bad guy, but he's filling Screech's head with all this depressing stuff. He doesn't realize how susceptible Screech is."

"Remember when he was studying the laws of probability in high school, Zack?" Kelly asked. "He found out he had a one in six-thousand chance of being hit by a falling asteroid. He wore that football helmet for *weeks*."

"He is a real sensitive guy," Zack agreed.

"We've got to get rid of Porter," Leslie said. "But we don't think we should go through Mike."

"Good thinking," Zack said, crumbling off a piece of muffin. "He'll just make you guys sit in a circle and share your feelings. For an ex-pro-football player, that guy is a big pile of mush."

"I don't want to share my feelings," Alex grumbled. "I want to kick the guy out!"

"We need a scheme," Leslie said.

"That's why we called you, Zack," Kelly added. "Can you help us?"

Zack stared into Kelly's deep blue eyes. "Of course," he said automatically. "Don't worry, guys. This is a minor prob for a major scam-meister. Now, first item of business: coffee refill. My brain feels a little crusty this morning."

"Check," Slater said, reaching over to pour Zack more coffee.

"Second, let's consider the character of our opponent," Zack said. "What's he really like?"

"He's Mr. Doom and Gloom," Kelly said.

"The only time he was even bearable was at my party," Alex added.

"What do you mean, Alex?" Zack asked.

"Well, he actually danced," Alex said.

"And I've got the mashed toes to prove it," Leslie put in.

"I noticed that," Zack said. "I thought it was kind of strange, actually."

"Me, too," Kelly agreed. "Porter was dragging around here all week. He kept saying that he wasn't interested in socializing. He wanted to be free to contemplate the universe. Then, all of a sudden, he was the life of the party."

Zack choked on his coffee. "That's it," he said.

"What's it?" Alex said. She looked around the table, her auburn curls flying. "Did I miss something?"

"Just the Morris brain at work," Slater snickered.

"I have a plan," Zack said.

¤ ¤ ¤

Porter hesitated when Kelly asked him to Sierra Square that night.

"Why me?" he said.

"Because I think you'll have fun," Kelly told him. She crossed her fingers behind her back. "It's a round-table symposium. The subject is the banality of popular culture." Zack had told her to say that. He didn't think Porter would come if he knew it was Dance Party Night.

"Well," Porter said, "in *that* case . . ."

When they drove up to Sierra Square, they heard rock music booming as Porter was parking the car. He gave Kelly an inquisitive look.

"Well, here at the Square, they feel you need to

experience pop culture in order to critique it," Kelly babbled. When Porter nodded thoughtfully, she let out a relieved breath.

She led him to Apartment 2G, where Dino and Tube lived. The door was open, and they looked inside. Dino and Tube were slam dancing in Velcro suits. Every time they met and tried to pull apart, the rest of the crowd cheered.

Porter sniffed. "Very amusing."

Heather stuck her head out the door. She recognized Kelly and waved. "Come on in! It's almost time for the limbo contest! Then we're doing the underwater polka."

"*This* is a symposium?" Porter asked Kelly.

"Well, there *is* a round table," Kelly said weakly. "It's in the kitchen."

Zack hurried out of the party. "Glad you could make it, guys! Come on inside. The Velcro suits are all taken, but the limbo is starting up."

Porter hung back. "I don't know about this."

Zack took his elbow firmly. When the music changed from rock to calypso, he shouted, "Hey, gang! Meet my friend, Dr. Doom!"

"Cool!" Tube said.

"Welcome, Doc!" Kiki said cheerfully.

"Dr. Doom!" Marie chortled. "Awesome. Come on. It's limbo time!"

Porter was surrounded by the partying crowd

and hustled inside. Within minutes, Kiki had twined plastic leis around his neck and pushed him underneath the limbo bar.

Porter was surprisingly graceful. He came out on the other side to thunderous cheers and applause. He looked surprised for a second. Then he grinned.

"Here we go," Zack murmured.

Kelly watched in amazement as Porter joined the conga line to limbo once again. He went under the bar with inches to spare. He danced away with Kiki. Again and again, he writhed underneath the bar as it was lowered closer and closer to the floor. When he won the contest, he ripped off his black turtleneck and howled.

"Cowabunga, dudes!" he screamed.

"There was a complete wild man underneath all that French philosophy," Kelly said wonderingly to Zack. "Who knew?"

Porter danced by them, Kiki at his side. "I get to start underwater polka!" he said, beaming. "Isn't that awesome?"

"Awesome, Porter," Zack congratulated him.

"You're so lucky, Zack," Porter said. "You get to live here."

"Actually, I have to give up my apartment," Zack said. "I lost my job."

"Bummer," Porter said, frowning. Then he

brightened. "Hey, I've got an idea. Why don't I take it?"

"That's a *great* idea," Zack said as if he had never thought of it.

"I'll move in tomorrow!" Porter said. Kiki tugged at his arm as polka music began. "Gotta dance, dude!"

Kelly laughed as Porter swung Kiki into his arms and danced toward the pool. They fell in with a loud splash.

"How did you know, Zack?" she asked him, shaking her head. "I never would have guessed it. Porter wasn't *really* depressed. He was just insecure and lonely. He didn't know how to make friends. All he needed was a crowd that wouldn't let him say no."

"It was a good guess," Zack said. "He jumped at the chance to live in the suite. He was probably intimidated by you guys because you're all so tight. That's why he latched onto Screech."

"Poor Porter," Kelly said. "But I think he's found the right place at last." She turned to him. "But what about you? You just gave up your apartment. I didn't know you lost your job."

Zack nodded. "I wanted to anyway, Kelly. To tell you the truth, I wasn't very happy here."

A slow smile spread over Kelly's face. "You weren't?"

"I guess I found out that I'm only an *occasional* party animal," Zack said.

"Hmm," Kelly said. "Gosh, Zack, all this insight. I'm really impressed."

"*Surprised* is more like it," Zack teased. "I think I'm insulted. You never saw me as an insightful guy before."

A slight blush spread over Kelly's cheeks. "Maybe I *hoped* you weren't insightful," she said softly. "Because then you wouldn't figure out how much I missed you." She took a step toward him. "How much I wanted you back in my life."

Zack felt Kelly's soft arms steal around his neck. It wasn't often that he couldn't think of a thing to say. But it was just as well, because all of a sudden, his lips were too busy to talk.

¤ ¤ ¤

On Monday night, Zack grabbed his history book and flopped down on the couch in the suite. On Sunday, he'd moved back in and Porter had moved out. Everything was back the way it should be.

Finally, he realized what he had. Living at the suite with his buddies gave him the perfect mixture of fun and peace and quiet. He never realized how great it was to have a suite that was at least *occasionally* calm.

He cracked open his history book. The past

weeks had been a whirlwind of activity, and it was time to get back to work.

Crash!

Zack almost fell on the floor when the door banged open. He peeked over the top of the couch.

Dino and Tube stood in the doorway, wearing balloon animals twisted around their heads. They were carrying a stack of pizzas.

"Hey, dude!" Tube greeted him. "Don't look so surprised. Didn't you remember that Monday night was Crash a Dorm Room Night?"

"Don't bother to get up," Dino chimed in. "The rest of the gang's on their way!"

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Exit, Stage Right

Alex is a shoe-in for the lead in the school play, until famous teen actress Merlin Scott Jones shows up at the last minute for auditions. Merlin won an Oscar when she was nine! There's no way Alex can compete with that.

But losing the leading role is just the beginning of Alex's trouble. Merlin throws temper tantrums at rehearsals and treats the other students like servants. She's totally impossible!

Meanwhile, Slater is really enjoying his freshman literature class. He's been trading secret journal entries with another student, and he's totally engrossed in her thoughts and feelings.

As it turns out, Merlin is the one who's exchanging journals with Slater. And if the child star has her way, she and Slater will soon be the hottest new couple at Cal U.

Will Slater fall for Merlin? Will Alex keep her cool at rehearsals? Find out when you read *Exit, Stage Right*, the terrific new novel about "Saved by the Bell's" college clan.

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